

SEVENTEEN

TWO SHILLINGS

# NEW WORLDS

*fiction of the future*





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# NEW WORLDS

*fiction of the future*

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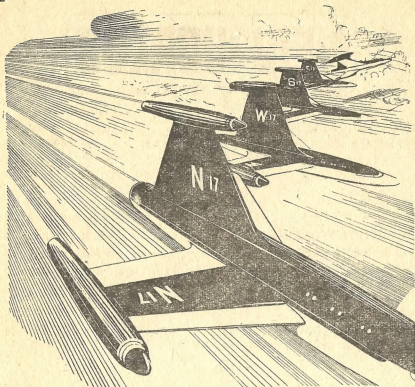
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*With an impregnable fortress and super weapons world peace was assured by the UN island base. Any ambitious nation seeking world control would have to adopt a subtle approach to outwit the garrison.*

## PROJECT — PEACE !

By LAN WRIGHT

Illustrated by CLOTHIER

The island sweltered under the noonday heat of the tropic sun as Glen Hardin emerged from the door of the large, low, white building which was the central feature of its flat, regular surface.

He reached for his pipe and stretched his lean, tanned frame in a small ecstasy of freedom, an unconscious movement which symbolised for him the end of another four-hour watch, for even the faith and interest which he had in his work could not relieve entirely the boredom of the watch periods.

He lifted his head and squinted up into the steely blue sky, his eyes watering slightly against the sun. Even in the glare he could make out the dim mistiness of the Screen, and his eyes followed it down until it blended





imperceptibly with the heat-hazed horizon. He never failed to wonder at the flimsy, almost invisible shield which was the one thing which stood between the island and almost instant destruction.

As he lit his pipe the sound of the inner door closing made him turn his head in time to see Rob Justin come out of the building. Wordlessly he offered his tobacco pouch, and Justin accepted it with a muttered thanks.

It was a never-failing ritual, thought Hardin; come off watch, stand for a minute in the sun, and Justin is there to borrow the pouch. In two years the amount of tobacco he had given away must be pretty large. He sighed, and said, "Good watch, Rob?"

The other shrugged his wide, thickset shoulders, "As usual—boring." He passed the pouch back: "Lord, but I'll be glad when my turn of leave comes round, Glen, another three months and I'll be as batty as a loon. Nothing but heat and sunshine, telefilms and an insufficient ration of alcohol.

I even tried a pass at Julie last night and she stopped me colder than the Screen."

Hardin grinned and blew out a long streamer of smoke. "Wrong approach," he said.

"No wonder; I haven't got any of the trimmings to help me—no sweet music, except the radio, no soft lights except the ones that illuminate every scientific structure on the island. A fine place it is to be romantic," he waved a hand in an expression of disgust. "I didn't mind at first, Glen, I'd got your high ideals of being one of the saviours of mankind; now I'm even beyond boredom."

"Well, the leave won't do you any good, you know that."

"It's the one thing that keeps me sane, even if everything is as bad as I've been told."

They moved off slowly along the rough path as Hardin told him, "It is that bad, Rob, you'll do just what everyone else does after a month of it, go and bury yourself in the backwoods of Canada or Africa or some other place where civilisation mercifully hasn't caught up."

"It's still a chance, I may be the one to find a way round it, that's what keeps me going."

Hardin shrugged, and Justin went on bitterly, "I never realised there were two hundred fools like us in the whole Universe, knowing what I do now I'd say there couldn't be more than one—me. Why should we throw away everything that's natural, our homes and friends, our relatives and all that makes life worth living just to sit on a stinking little island in the middle of the Pacific while the other three thousand millions just wait for the first chance to blast us off the face of the earth."

"I don't know that I gave up such a lot," said Hardin mildly. "A few crowded cities, a pile of debts, and an endless struggle for existence, never knowing when I went to bed whether I wouldn't wake up next morning with another war raging round my head. And as for friends, I wouldn't swap any that I've got here for any that I had before."

There was a long silence before Justin remarked gloomily: "I wish I were a woman, they seem to stand it better than we do."

"Psychologically women are a lot calmer than men, though you wouldn't think it at times," replied Hardin. "At first all any of us think about is the Screen, we think of it with a sort of awed wonder; with the men that wonder turns to hatred, but with a woman it's very different. Take Chris, for instance. She gets a kick out of the power she has, the feeling of having the world in the palm of her hand. It's a power we men have grown used to, but to Chris—she has only to press a button to wipe out any spot on the globe she chooses. She has only to press another and down comes the Screen, in seconds every country in the world knows we're unprotected and inside an hour we have a dozen atom bombs in our laps. To a woman all that spells power with a capital P, she is master of the Screen, and she revels in it; to a man it is just a prison wall designed to keep him in. Chris told me all about it when we joined together, but each of us got over our respective worries when we found a mutual interest in each other, and between us I reckon we've made a pretty good job of our lives and happiness." He laughed, "Believe it or not, Rob, but Chris and I started out just the way



you and Julie are doing, and look at us now."

"Even with no children?" Justin scowled, his lips twisting derisively.

The smile slipped from Hardin's face. "We were prepared for that, even before we met. Right from the start we both believed in what we had to do here."

"Yes, I know, I had two years to think it over as well."

"It's one of the prices we have to pay for keeping the world in one piece. I've got all I want here, Rob, and you'll find something like I did before long." He grinned slyly. "Perhaps Julie will alter her mind, and if she doesn't then there are plenty of other girls around. Oh, I know you won't be married in the sense they are outside, but Chris and I have something stronger than a ring and a few words holding us together, and as for children, we've got the whole world to look after."

Justin said nothing, but out of the corner of his eye Hardin could see the angry scowl lurking in the corners of his mouth and the lines of his face.

"Come over and have lunch with us, Rob?" he asked, "Chris'll be glad to see you."

"No, thanks all the same, I'll knock myself something cold together, I've got some things to do."

They walked around a curve in the main building and before them lay a small group of white bungalows, scattered in groups of two or three throughout a small oasis of palms.

"I'll pick you up just before midnight," said Justin. "Sorry I blew my top off just now."

Hardin grinned, "Forget it, Rob, you'll get over it."

He turned off along one of the winding concrete paths that led between the neatly irregular lines of bungalows, and went through the front gate of his own home, up the short path to the front door. It was open and he went straight in, comfortably aware of the cool shade after the heat outside.

Chris's slim form came from the kitchen as he entered and he smiled wearily at her. She crossed wordlessly, a pleased smile on her face, and shook her golden hair back from her face as she reached to kiss him. She said: "Harry Marlow's in the lounge, he's been waiting ten minutes, so I've put lunch back half an hour."

Hardin frowned. "Wonder what he wants? Thanks, anyway, Chris."

"Perhaps it's Justin."

"Could be." He stuffed his pipe into his hip pocket and went along the hall to the large back room which was the lounge. It looked out over the sea, and on the shaded verandah he found his visitor fanning himself with a paper and gazing out over the half-mile of sandy scrub to where the leaden waves rolled in on a tiny beach.

Hardin shut the door. "Hallo, Harry, what brings you around?"

The grey-haired man rose at the greeting. "Hallo, Glen, sorry if I'm disturbing your lunch, but I thought this would be as good a time as any to catch you on your own."

Hardin waved him back to his seat. "That's all right, what is it?"

"Well, we're worried about Justin."

"I guessed so."

"His leave is only three months off, so that has to be the deadline as far

as we're concerned, and so far he hasn't made one definite move as far as we know."

Hardin pursed his lips, and hesitated a moment before answering. "I've wondered about it too," he said at last. "So far, all he's doing is act like any other first-termers would act. We've watched him all the time he's been here, and you know as well as I do that we've been through his belongings a dozen times in the last couple of years. I don't see what more we can do but wait and see."

"That's what worries me," said Marlow. "We know he's a plant, we know he's out to destroy the Island, or at least help someone else destroy, but we can't get any further."

"Pity we can't knock him off straight away and have done with it," growled Hardin.

"We can't, Glen, we *must* find out who he is acting for. You know as well as I do that as much as every nation on Earth wants us out of the way none of them will dare to risk such an elaborate and carefully prepared plan for doing it unless they had some weapon which they believed could consolidate their advantage."

Hardin nodded in agreement. Marlow was right about that, there was no sense in anyone destroying the island if they were going to lose all advantage in the first big war that would be sure to break out almost immediately afterwards. Their actions must be based on the almost certain knowledge that they could force home their preparations to the point of world domination, otherwise they would never attempt it.

Marlow shook his head. "We must know who, what and when."

"Even if we find out who, we may not find out anything about their future plans," demurred Hardin.

"True," agreed Marlow, "but with even a little knowledge we may be able to bluff the rest of it from them."

Hardin nodded, "All right, what do you want me to do, Harry?"

"Nothing much, but I think you might suggest putting his leave forward about six weeks, then if he has made any plans that will upset them, it might even trap him into some premature action."

"On what excuse?"

"Oh, tell him we think he's more than usually overwrought, and that we've managed to fix him in earlier because we think it will do him good. Anyway his reaction might be interesting. Oh, and try and get Julie to take an interest in him, he's fallen for her and he might let his hair down in front of her."

Hardin laughed, "You don't miss a trick, do you, Harry," he said. "All right, I'll try it."

"Don't tell Julie too much, just enough to satisfy her, but—well, you know what I mean." Marlow rose and walked towards the door. "Let's see, this makes the forty-third attempt on the island in the twenty-two years it has been in existence." He grinned. "I may see the half-century up yet."

Hardin opened the door for him, smiling as he did so. "You never really worry, do you?"

"No, not really, I'm too much of a fatalist. Anyway I'm not too upset about this one, but I think we should be careful."



"Bye, Harry, I'll keep you posted." Hardin watched him out of the front door and down the concrete path.

He stood thoughtfully for a while after Marlow had disappeared; true, as his visitor had said, there should be nothing to worry about really, they had their tabs on the one source of trouble.

He wondered if Herkomer had foreseen all this trouble when he had envisaged the island. Brilliant man that he was, Herkomer had allowed for almost every contingency imaginable, he had worked one great invention in with others until each one fitted like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. The Force Screen to protect, the Omega ray to destroy, and Reaction field to detect. An impregnable fortress held by completely trustworthy humanitarians capable of destroying any portion of the globe at the slightest sign of trouble. Under such circumstances who would dare try and start a war? True, it had taken four disastrous failures to convince the nations of the world, but peace by force was now over twenty years old and the combined efforts of every scientist outside the island had failed to touch its strength.

Hardin wondered what the result would have been if Herkomer had offered his inventions to the world instead of keeping them secret and using the terrific financial resources he had accumulated to set his plans in operation. If subsequent world reaction were anything to go by Herkomer would have been legally murdered and his discoveries made available to whichever great power was willing to pay for them.

"Lunch is ready, darling." Chris's voice from the kitchen brought him back to reality. He sighed; Marlow was right, they dare not crack down on Justin too soon, they had to spring the trap first and find out what lay behind it. He turned slowly back towards the coolness of the dining room.

Chris had both fans going, and he noted with pleasure that lunch was his favourite, cold chicken and salad. He filled his plate with relish from the large bowl, preparing to lose himself in the pleasure of his meal, when Chris asked, "What did Harry want?"

His face clouded slightly. "Oh, he was wondering how Justin was."

"He's due to go on leave soon, isn't he?"

"Yes, that's the spot we're in. We daren't let him go on leave in case he's managed to arrange for something after he's gone, although that doesn't seem likely, and we can't crack down on him a moment before he does leave in case that is the zero hour we're looking for."

Chris toyed with a portion of chicken. "Of course he wants to go on leave?"

Hardin laughed. "Just because he's a plant he hasn't started acting any different from anyone else."

"No, I'd noticed that, but I thought that if he was a part of a plan which was aimed at the destruction of the island, then he must know that if it's successful he will have no more time to spend here anyway. I should have expected him to act a little differently under the psychological effect that fact would have."

"That's true," admitted Hardin, "but if he had shown any signs like that I'm sure I'd have noticed them, after all he has been my special pigeon these last months."

"How many of us know about him?"

"About half a dozen, the three of us who were on the selection board at the time, plus Marlow, Rochelle and yourself, six in all."

"I thought it might be better if everyone knew," suggested Chris.

"No, it would inevitably affect their approach towards him in the long run, some people are not so good at hiding their emotions as others, and we couldn't risk giving him the slightest suspicion that we knew. Ever since the day we spotted him we've been careful to keep it to as few as possible, that's why I was assigned to look after him. As a member of the selection board I was less likely to arouse his suspicions by saying or doing the wrong thing, and if I did then there could have been the legitimate excuse that, as a first-termer he was still officially under observation."

Chris ate her lunch in silence for a time, then she asked: "How did you spot him exactly?"

Hardin looked at her in surprise. "Well, you know the technique as well as I do, deep trance hypnosis. It's instantaneous and providing we watch conditions carefully, adjusting blocks and so on, the subject never knows it's happened."

"Yes, I know that, but I wondered if there might be a clue there, after all the technical side of it is only known to sixth-termers under strict secrecy. Even Herkomer didn't invent that part of the scheme."

"So what?"

"That means that outside of about thirty of us no one in the world knows a thing about such an advanced degree of hypnotic control?"

"I don't see how that helps us."

Chris dropped her fork on her plate and sat back with a sigh. "For a minute I thought I had something there."

Hardin grinned sympathetically. "Never mind, Chris, let me worry about it. Marlow had a couple of suggestions that I'm going to try. Do you think you could arrange supper for Julie and Justin? Say to-morrow evening?"

"Well, Julie won't be keen."

"She'll be keen if you don't mention Justin, and he'll be keen for just the opposite reason."

Chris laughed. "All right, I'll see Julie this evening."

"Good girl, I'm going to turn in for an hour or two," said Hardin. "I can do with some sleep."

"I'll come to you later on."

When Hardin got home after his evening watch next day he found Chris and Julie drinking cocktails in the lounge.

As he entered Chris's eyes widened in surprise. "Where's Rob?"

"He'll be along," replied Hardin, his eyes on the slim brunette seated beside her.

The girl sat up with a start at the mention of Justin's name, and stared accusingly at Chris. "You didn't say he was coming," she said, an accusingly questioning tone in her voice, but before Chris could answer Hardin broke in.

"I told her not to tell you Julie. You see we know how he feels about you, and—well, we want to take advantage of it." He paused, a slight flush of embarrassment underlying his tan.

"Oh!" Julie's manner was menacing as she sat stiffly upright on the divan.



Hardin took a deep breath. "I can't tell you a great deal about him, but he's been acting rather strangely of late, and we're a little worried about his behaviour. We expect most first-termers to be nervy and overstrung towards the end of their period, but he is more upset than the average. We want someone we can trust to keep an eye on him, cultivate him—you know, try and help him, and let us know if he acts in any way out of the ordinary."

"Play on his emotions," suggested the girl sweetly.

"Yes, I guess that's it——"

"Do you want me to join him?"

Hardin flushed again, more deeply. "No, Julie, we don't want you to go as far as that, but if you do notice anything unusual or in any way alarming in his manner or behaviour then we want to know about it."

She looked at him balefully, and said: "I thought I was going to have such a nice evening."

There was a long silence. Chris put her hand on the girl's arm, and after another long moment she said.

"All right, Glen, if it's that important——"

"It is, Julie, I assure you."

There was a rattle at the front door and the sound of someone entering. Hardin breathed deeply, another minute talking to Julie and he might not have been able to convince her. The whole point of the supper party would have been wasted. He called out: "Come in, Rob," and a second later Justin came into the lounge. His face lighted with pleasure as he saw Julie seated on the divan.

"Glen didn't say you'd be here." His voice sounded like a schoolboy with his first ice cream.

Chris laughed. "Well, come and eat now, you can enjoy each other's company afterwards."

Throughout the meal Justin was red-faced and tongue-tied, and Julie stiffly severe and unbending despite the warning glances that Chris flashed at her from behind Justin's back as she served the various courses. The bulk of the conversation naturally fell on Hardin as the host, but, born orator that he was, the situation taxed even his powers of conversation. Coffee and liqueurs came together with a long and deathly silence while Hardin searched frantically for some reasonable topic of conversation. Desperately, but only half-consciously he asked,

"Rob, how would you like to start your leave a week or so early?"

Justin's face swung on him as he looked up, a trifle startled at what he had said, but if he expected to see alarm, suspicion or distrust he was disappointed. There was only eagerness, pleasure and anticipation.

"You're joking!"

"No," Hardin shook his head. "We may be able to spare you about six weeks early."

"It'll be heaven," cried Justin, delightedly. "That means I've only another seven to do."

"That's right." Hardin was suddenly aware that he couldn't have slipped the question in at a better time, even if it did not produce the result he had half-hoped for. There was a hard knot of disappointment as he realised

that the first of Marlow's ideas had not borne fruit.

"You see," said Chris, "he's so keen that he won't want to come back to us after it's over."

"Oh, yes, he will," replied Julie, grimly. "He'll be treated just like all the others. They all got tired of being treated like outcasts, followed everywhere by police, secret and otherwise."

"Is it really that bad?" asked Justin, suddenly sober.

"I'm afraid so," answered Hardin, swinging his wineglass gently in his hand. "And worse, too. You're forced to carry a small detector wherever you go so that we can keep track of you. It's like a wrist-watch, and once it leaves your body we know something has happened to you because it ceases to operate. Should you be killed the cessation of your pulsebeat affects it the same way, and we can pinpoint exactly where it happened and take suitable measures. The only snag is that every police department in the world can also detect you. They found out soon after we started using the scheme, and so far we've not been able to get anything more effective. As a result, they follow you everywhere. You can't go to a theatre because all the seats are sold; you can't go to a night club because all the tables have been booked, and you can't get a bed except in a filthy flophouse or on a public park bench. Oh, they're nice and polite about it, but nevertheless they hate our guts even though we're saving them from almost certain destruction. Decent people everywhere detest us because they've been brought up to do so, and if they don't they're usually too scared to admit it, that is except the few who think it so worth while that they surmount every obstacle to join us."

He threw his drink down his throat with an expression of disgust. "The world is just that rotten. Even though we've proved that we can outlaw war forever, that doesn't seem to be what they really want. They still put war-mongers and armament makers before the artist or the farmer."

"But there must be something we can do about this leave business," insisted Justin.

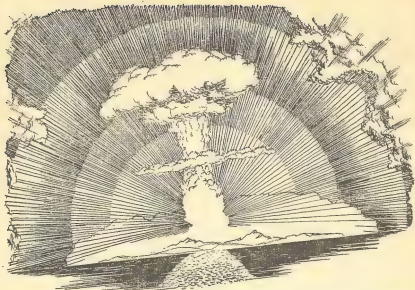
Hardin shook his head. "We tried it once, we threatened them in several unpleasant ways, knowing full well that we wouldn't do any more than just talk about it, but all it got was the right to sleep in dirty flophouses and eat at third-rate restaurants. We could get drunk in any low dive the police wouldn't venture in, but that was all. Now you know why most of us seek the wide open spaces and commune with nature," Hardin laughed sarcastically as he finished.

There was a long minute's silence, and then Justin remarked: "Under those conditions it's a wonder anyone joins at all."

Hardin eyed him with speculative interest.

"It's not so hard," he replied. "We need roughly four a year out of the whole world, that is one group of twenty every five years. We get a hundred times that number of volunteers. Some are just cranks, others are just curious, and a lot just hate their fellow men and figure this is the easiest place where they can do the most harm. We have to sort the real idealist from the rest, the stable from the unstable; everyone is here because they belong here. The others are out—the curiosity seekers, the cranks, and the youngsters who have just been crossed in love. Why did you join us, Rob?"





The question slipped out quickly and smoothly, with a casual laziness that was deceptive, while Hardin's eyes searched the younger man's face. The mouth half-opened to reply, but the eyes were blankly puzzled for an instant before he answered, "I could not bear the thought of a Universe without Man."

Hardin sighed lightly, and looked at Julie who was sitting with her forehead puckered in obvious puzzlement.

Justin said: "Suppose we do the dishes for a change, Glen, and give the girls a break?"

Hardin's breath came slowly and quietly from his chest as he suddenly realised how long he had been holding it.

"That's an idea," he returned. "They can have a good gossip while we're gone."

It was after midnight when Julie and Justin departed, and after he had seen them out of the front door Hardin found Chris sitting in an armchair staring pensively out of the lounge window.

"Penny for them?" he asked quietly.

She stirred and then shook her head impatiently. "I don't know, Glen, the more I thought about it this evening as I looked at him, the more I felt that your hypnotic examination should have revealed more than you say it did."

Hardin sat down, searching automatically for his pipe. "Well, we're as certain as we can be, even though we got so little out of him."

"But if he knew the island was to be neutralised, he must have known how it was to be done."

"Not necessarily. If he were just a cog in the master plan he may have been ordered to act as the situation warrants. If that was so then we would not learn any more than we have done. As a matter of fact what he did tell us hinted that such was the case."

Chris sat up sharply. "Did it now; what exactly did he say?"

Hardin puffed his pipe thoughtfully, shielding the bowl of it with his hand as he drew in mouthfuls of air. "To be absolutely precise he said: 'Trigger, act accordingly. Bring down the Screen. Trigger, trigger.' That was all, though later on during the examination he kept repeating 'Trigger' over and over again as if he were delirious. It seemed to cause him considerable unrest."

"And no one made anything out of it?"

"No, the psychologists have been over the recording a dozen times since without getting any further."

Chris leaned back in her chair and stared thoughtfully out into the night. Hardin puffed his pipe, and for several minutes there was silence.

"Glen," said Chris at last, "suppose Justin didn't know he was a traitor!"

Hardin blinked in astonishment. "Say that again."

"Suppose whoever is behind him knew all about our advances in deep trance hypnosis. Even if they didn't know for certain they could have a pretty good guess, otherwise we would never have found out about half the spies who have tried to get on to the island over the last fifteen years. The very fact that we have a hundred per cent record for interception would give them a first-rate clue. Suppose they have been experimenting with it, they could easily have reached a new depth—after all we know only too well that we have only scratched the fringes of hypnotic control with our own technique. Suppose, for an instant, that they were able to implant information with such effect that even our examinations were useless to reveal it, then you would learn nothing, would you?"

"That's true," agreed Hardin with a frown. "But the fact is that we did learn something, not much I admit, but enough to set us on the right track."

"That could have been an error of judgment on their part, and a lucky one for us. It was mere chance that our own hypnosis was strong enough to detect it, we were lucky to get a warning at all."

"I follow so far, but information such as that would have to be implanted so deeply that even the person holding it would be incapable of divulging it when conscious, let alone when in an hypnotic trance."

Chris nodded excitedly. "That's what I meant when I suggested that Justin was an unconscious traitor. Whoever is behind him would make sure there were sufficient mental blocks to ensure his correct reaction to all the situations he is likely to meet for as long as necessary. Once the signal is given to break down those mental blocks he will know just what he has to do and when to do it."

Hardin sat very still for a long moment, his mind going over all that had happened from the moment they had found out that Justin was not all that he seemed. There was a lot in what Chris had said, so many facts fitted in with her theory. But what sort of signal would it be that would break down the mental blocks—he said suddenly and quietly, "You mean a trigger."

"The key—of course," cried Chris. "That was what he kept repeating, 'Trigger'."

Hardin shook his head regretfully. "No, it's too easy, Chris," he returned. "Anyone over a period of years might use that word, and according to your theory the first mention of it would set him in motion at once. It is possible

that 'trigger' is part of the necessary combination, and anyway you've given us something to work on. I'll have a chat with Harry in the morning, he may have some more to say about it."

He rose and stretched wearily. "Come on, darling, let's get to bed, I've got a watch at eight in the morning."

Marlow and Hardin worked hard on the suggestions Chris had put forward, but even another dose of deep trance hypnosis—of which he was quite unaware—got nothing more out of Justin, and the weeks went by with no other sign of approaching trouble save a steadily mounting tension in all who were aware of Justin's latent treachery.

Two weeks before Justin's leave was due to start reports began to come in which gave disturbing indications of a large-scale political break between the Pan Asian Federation and the Euro-American Commonwealth. The analysis of the information received by the politico psychologists on the island staff indicated that the trouble had been instigated by the Federation, although careful attempts had been made to disguise the fact and place the blame on the Commonwealth.

For three days tension mounted steadily until it was obvious that a major political break could not be avoided. Marlow held several conferences on the situation and after one of them he broadcast a stern warning to the Federation stating that their blame in the crisis was firmly established, and ordering them to take immediate steps to relieve the position.

There was no response.

"Not that I expected one," Marlow confessed to Hardin some twenty-four hours later. "It's obvious that the danger mark is getting close; there is considerable air activity in the Pacific area, but I can't for the life of me think why they're being so open about it, they must know we shall make preparations to meet their threats. After what's happened during the last few days they might as well have sent us a letter about it."

"I wonder if it's just a diversion," said Hardin. "Perhaps in a few days things will quieten down and when they've lulled us into thinking it's all over up goes the real balloon."

"Maybe. Has Justin made any move?"

"None, he's acting just as mad as the rest of us."

"If Chris is right he will—until the time is right."

"The more I think about it the more I feel she's right about him," remarked Hardin. "Julie never found out a thing except that he's crazy about her."

Marlow grinned. "Can't blame him, she's an attractive girl. Does she reciprocate?"

"Only to the extent of feeling sorry for him. Maternal instinct Chris calls it."

"I'll send another warning to-night," decided Marlow, "and give them an ultimatum. That will either shut them up or make them show their hand."

His second warning was broadcast from the Main Laboratory at eight that evening, and in it Marlow gave the Federation until midday local time the next day to cease their hostile activity and restore the political equilibrium. When he had ended Marlow gave instructions that four wavebands should be kept open for any response that might be forthcoming in addition to the

world-wide monitoring service already operating.

"Do you expect any reply this time?" queried Hardin.

"Frankly, no," replied Marlow. "I think they've gone too far to make a public withdrawal, unless it's part of their strategy. They may make a gradual withdrawal of pressure without admitting they're climbing down, but knowing their psychological outlook I don't believe they would even consider such action." He smiled a trifle smugly. "I think this might be the spot we've been looking for, and if it is then we've fixed their deadline for them."

"How come?"

Marlow's smile broadened. "I've told them we'll hold off until noon to-morrow. They knew we won't act before then and they will almost certainly postpone their own actions until the last possible moment, so——"

"You figure noon to-morrow."

"Between six a.m. and noon," Marlow nodded.

Hardin laughed admiringly. "I don't know how you do it, Harry," he said. "With trouble like this around you can still find time to be subtle."

"Not subtle, just obvious," said Marlow. "I'd do the same in their place."

Normal watches were maintained throughout the night, although Marlow insisted that double watch be kept in the Detector Lab. "Since," he confided to Hardin, "I could be wrong. To-morrow, Glen, I'd like you to take over from me at ten a.m. in the Radiation Lab. I'll put Justin on with you so that you can keep an eye on him."

"Is it wise?" asked Hardin.

"If I do otherwise he'll get suspicious. I'm not going to ask for trouble by putting him in the Screen Lab. I'm leaving Julie in there and putting Jim Wheland with her. There isn't much more we can do. As long as the Screen is up the island is safe, and as long as the island is in existence nothing will happen. I have that faith, Glen."

"Have you had a look at the Reactor Chart lately?" asked Hardin.

Marlow nodded. "Yes, but that's nothing to go by."

"It's at a higher peak than I've ever seen it before."

"You weren't here during the crises of '67. The Chart is only up 63.5 this evening; critical maximum is 85 and on four occasions during '67 it went up to 82.5 and still nothing happened."

He patted Hardin's shoulder. "Go home and get some rest, Glen, and stop worrying. I'm staying in the Main control to-night, and if anything does break you'll hear the alarm."

Hardin nodded. "Right, Harry, I guess following Justin around all these weeks is beginning to tell on me, or else it's the strain of expecting something to happen any minute."

Marlow laughed. "See you in the morning."

Despite his physical lassitude Hardin spent three hours and six tablets trying to sleep, and when he awakened the next morning it was with a feeling of foggy distaste, as if he had a hangover with nothing to account for it.

He couldn't eat breakfast despite Chris's remonstrances, and he arrived at the Lab. fifteen minutes before he needed. Marlow was still there.

"You're early, Glen," he greeted him.

Hardin grimaced. "I wish it was to-morrow," he growled.



"Being tactful I won't ask why, but you have all the symptoms of a beautiful hangover."

"Without the memories that make it beautiful."

Marlow laughed and stretched in his chair. "Justin will be along in a minute so I'll leave you to it. If you want me I'll be in the Radio Lab."

After Marlow had gone Hardin spent several minutes making the routine instrument check that a change of watch demanded, and he was only half-way through when Justin put in an appearance. It was five to ten.

They checked with the other laboratories and stations throughout the island and settled down to a long and nerve-straining wait. Justin made three attempts to start conversation, but each one was either ignored by Hardin or merely awarded an uninterested grunt in reply. Justin gave up and applied himself to unnecessary checks of the other equipment in the Lab.

At five to twelve Marlow broadcast over the intercom: "Nothing to report. All sections check please."

They both listened intently to the various laboratories and ranging stations as they reported to the Main Lab. Hardin's own report was a nil increase in Radiation activity, but he noted with inward alarm that the Activity Reactors had sent their chart up to seventy-nine with a danger mark of eighty-three in the Pacific area. The Radar plot increased his alarm by reporting excessive air activity from various islands in the Pacific and along the east coast of the Asian continent. At three minutes to twelve the reports were complete and one minute later Marlow broadcast: "Carrier wave coming through on forty-seven metres. I am switching to intercom broadcast for staff information. Stand by."

His voice was replaced by the steady low-pitched hum of the incoming carrier wave. As he heard it, Hardin thought, "This is it."

He watched the clock on the wall of the Lab. as it ticked away the seconds towards noon. Justin sat motionless at his desk. The second hand ticked over the hour and as it did so the carrier wave pitched its buzzing an octave higher, and the loudspeaker blared, "This is Asian Radio. Asian Radio calling Screen Island. Screen Island acknowledge. Acknowledge."

The whine of the generators took the place of the voice as the Radio Lab. acknowledged the call, and a second after he finished the voice came again.

"Asian Radio. Asian Radio broadcasting a message from the Central Government of the Pan Asian Federation. The message reads: 'While we do not acknowledge any share of responsibility for the recent deterioration in the political situation, we, the Government of the Pan Asian People's Democracy, will do all in our power to reduce the tensions which are now causing so much concern. Such efforts as we shall make cannot of necessity be immediately effective, but such means as lie within our power will be used towards peaceful ends.' This is Asian Radio calling. The message ends. Please stand by for further transmission."

Hardin stared unbelievably at the loudspeaker. While it was certainly a message of concession, he could not believe that the Federation would go so far along the road to conciliation unless by so doing it could cloak its future activities. They must be using Marlow's ultimatum as an excuse to gain more time, and if they needed more time—— He glanced hurriedly at Justin, but the man had not moved, he still sat in his chair, his position

no different from what it had been before the broadcast. More time for Justin?

The carrier wave was still coming in, its low buzz filling the otherwise deathly silence of the laboratory, but nothing else moved. Hardin relaxed.

As he shifted slightly in his seat another voice from the speaker broke the silence. It was loud and harshly metallic, quite unlike that of the previous announcer.

"Agent J—operation Trigger. Agent J—operation Trigger."

The carrier wave cut off, and the silence in the lab. was tomblike as the last word of the message pounded like a giant hammer through Hardin's brain, "Trigger. Trigger."

He swivelled his chair quickly towards Justin who was still slouched comfortably at his desk. Chris had been right after all, but Justin still sat there unmoving. Perspiration stood out on Hardin's brow, his knuckles were white through the taut skin of his clenched hands.

"Funny sort of message, Glen," said Justin easily. He turned towards Hardin and saw his white strained face and tense posture. "What on earth's the matter with you? you look as if you'd seen a ghost."

Hardin's body relaxed and he licked his dry lips, easing his position as he shook his head and replied, "No, no, not yet." He grinned slightly, but there was no humour in his eyes.

Justin turned back to his desk, a puzzled frown on his face, and automatically set his eyes wandering over the control panel before him. Hardin watched his every move, his body tensing again and a screaming tension rising up in the pit of his stomach. He saw Justin reach slowly for the power switch. It was like a slow motion film watching his hand reach upward and out, the fingers opening to grip the heterodyned control.

"Justin, stop it." His voice was loud, harsh and cracked so that he hardly recognised himself. "Sit where you are and don't move."

Justin swung away from the board to face him, his eyes wide and incredulous, his face a picture of bewildered concern.

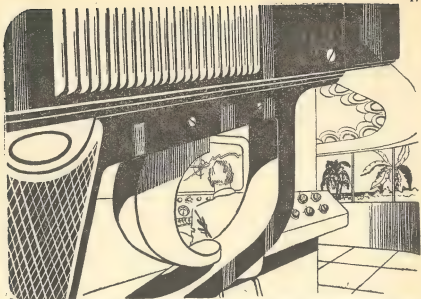
"What's wrong with you, Glen? The power's building up. I was only going to decrease it, that's all. For heaven's sake get a grip on yourself man."

He turned back to the board, his eyes moving back to the master power dial, and what he saw brought him out of his seat with a jerk.

"Glen, look, the main power's gone up five kilowatts, there's an overload from somewhere. Something's broken down. We'd best report to the Main Lab."

Involuntarily, Hardin's eyes went to the master dial and saw the big needle swinging over with slow and deadly precision towards the red danger line—already it was approaching the danger area as Justin had said, and it was moving rapidly up to the six kilowatt mark. Justin was right in assuming a breakdown on some major circuit to send the load up so quickly. Even as he looked Justin's hand went out to correct it, and over the intercom came: "Reaction Lab. reporting. Activity mounting to eighty-four point five and still rising. Heavy air concentrations over the Pacific and converging in an easterly direction."

Marlow's voice followed, calm and unconcerned, as he said: "Report received. Radiation Lab. report, please. Hardin, come in, please."



Hardin heard the summons and his eyes slid away from the power meter across, automatically, to the microphone switch of the intercom unit. In between lay the Screen indicator, and his eyes crossed it, flickered, and jumped back incredulously. He stood for one second, frozen, while his mind tried to register the fact that the red line on the dial was not where it should have been, in fact it was not even visible. His hand grabbed frantically for the microphone switch.

"Harry, the Screen's down." His voice was hysterical in its loudness and he didn't stop to turn up the switch, he didn't wait to see what Justin would do. He cleared the space between the board and the door in three strides and was outside in the blinding sun with thirty yards of bare ground between him and the entrance to the Screen Laboratory where Julie and Jim Whelan were on watch.

Dimly he heard Justin running after him shouting unintelligibly, but the words were lost in the whirlwind of his own calamitous thoughts. The rest of the world sank into insignificance beside the fact of the closed door of the other laboratory. It leaped at him in its stark bareness, one instant thirty yards away, the next his shoulder was thudding into it as he realised with an even greater shock that it was locked.

He raved insanely at Justin who came up seconds behind him, and it was a bewildered Justin who helped him charge the wooden barrier with mad ferocity. It fell at the third assault, and the pair of them sprawled helplessly over the wreckage on to the floor of the lab. Hardin was the first to recover, but even as he lifted his head and began to lever his body upright a voice he knew ordered, quietly and coldly,

"Stand quite still, and don't move hurriedly, otherwise it will be fatal."

He checked and eased himself even more slowly upright, a numb incredulity beating through his mind like the pounding of a huge drum. He heard

Justin's voice, quaint and almost comical with surprise.

"Julie—Julie, what the devil's going on?"

He lifted his head and took in the details of the scene with cold, efficient eyes. All was quiet and orderly, save for one corner where Whelan lay, face down, the back of his head a bloody mass of bone and brain, and Julie Korvin, two yards away, standing erect and unwavering, and in her hand a heavy pistol which he recognised as part of the lab. equipment.

He heard rather than saw Justin, two yards to his left, move to get up. He heard the scuffle of his feet against the wreckage of the door as he stumbled over it. It was sheer blind instinct that directed his own movements as he saw the gun swing off him in Justin's direction. The thunder of the shot echoed through the lab., and he heard Justin cry out once as he launched himself across the ten feet of space between himself and the girl. She tried to turn the gun back on him, and the second shot sang over his crouched form as his left shoulder hit her stomach. His head thudded against the bench as the impetus of his charge carried them both against it, and consciousness lapsed under the flaming red pain of the collision.

He was out for seconds only, and raising himself groggily from the floor he saw the girl lying unnaturally still and silent at his feet, her body twisted, her eyes blank and lifeless. The revolver was two feet from her right hand. He staggered to the control board and with fumbling hands switched back the power into the Screen circuit, watching with hazy eyes as the red line crept back to its normal position on the indicator. It slowed half-way up the dial, and after another moment its wavering form steadied and solidified into the red band which told him that the Screen was operating once again.

He turned weakly towards the door, stopping to examine Justin as he went. The man had a rapidly spreading stain on his left shoulder. He was alive but unconscious, and Hardin passed on into the sunlight. He leaned weakly against the side of the shattered door, closing his eyes against the blinding glare which sent lances of pain shooting through his head. He didn't hear the whine of the squadron of planes that passed four miles above, travelling at over a thousand miles an hour, for the concussion of the atom bombs which they carried shattered his already reeling consciousness before the sound of the engines registered on his brain. Six of them hit the Screen almost at once, and the pounding fury of their sound laid him once more, senseless on the ground. But the island lived around him, and the planes perished in the premature explosion of their own making. The three-mile hemisphere of the Screen held firm.

He awoke two hours later in a haze of pain. His head felt as if it was going to leave his body, and only Chris's cool hand on his brow brought him relief as he came to. He focused his eyes painfully on her troubled face, and was rewarded with a brilliant smile.

"I thought you were never coming out of it," she said.

He squinted painfully. "Where's Harry?"

"In the Main Lab., but you're not to worry, everything's being taken care of."

"The Screen——?"

She patted his arm gently. "The Screen is up. You must rest now, darling."



Reassured, he sank blissfully into a dreamless sleep, his memory happily not restored for the dreadful last five minutes before his consciousness previously left him. He slipped gratefully into a new and friendly oblivion, and when he awoke hours later Marlow was sitting in a chair on the other side of the room reading, and Chris was at his side, still watching.

He raised himself painfully. "Hi, Chris."

"Hi, yourself." She helped him up and propped the pillows at his head. "He's up and worrying, Harry."

Marlow smiled his welcome. "How do you feel, Glen?"

Hardin shook his head to clear the muzziness, and winced at the discomfort the movement caused him. "Could be a lot worse, and could be a lot better. How's Justin?"

"Unconscious, but he'll pull through all right."

"Julie?"

Marlow's face clouded, and he turned his eyes away from the bed towards the window. "Her back was broken," he replied quietly.

"That was when I charged her against the bench," said Hardin huskily, "after she shot Justin."

"What exactly did happen, Glen?" asked Marlow. "We've only been able to piece it together roughly from what we found, but there are too many gaps. Can you fill them in?"

Hardin lay back staring at the ceiling, trying to marshal his thoughts. After a minute he nodded. "I think so, Harry. You'll recall Chris's theory that Justin was an unconscious traitor?"

Marlow nodded. "Yes, but that only confused us. We're keeping a close guard on him at the moment, but that doesn't explain about Julie."

"Chris was right about Justin up to a point," said Hardin. "But only so far. The Federation had to get a spy in here, a traitor who was not only fanatical, but unconsciously so, and they could not run the risk of him or her being discovered. I think Julie was a perfectly legitimate first-termee when she came here, but the Federation got their hands on her during one of her leave spells and treated her with some form of deep trance hypnosis. I should say that their technique is a lot more advanced than ours, though I doubt if they are aware of that. They probably guessed that we never examine people returning from leave, but to be safe they got at one of our prospective first-termers and without him knowing about it planted just sufficient knowledge in his subconscious to arouse our interest when we examined him, but not enough for us to throw him out altogether as we usually do."

Marlow nodded understandingly. "Justin, of course."

"Right," said Hardin. "The Federation could not risk us poking our noses into everyone on the island if we became suspicious of their activities over the past few weeks, therefore Justin filled two purposes as far as we were concerned. He took our attention away from Julie, and he also made sure that we connected him, and no one but him, with the present reaction."

"But how did they know that she would be able to receive the message that would counter the mental blocks involved?"

Hardin smiled. "That was obvious, they knew quite well that we should issue a warning and therefore ask for a reply. Naturally, everyone on the

island would be anxious to listen and it was a ninety per cent certainty that Julie would hear the message."

Marlow nodded. "I understand that, but they still could not know that Julie would be in the Screen Lab. at the time when she would be wanted."

"Oh yes, they did. They knew when they first took her that she was chiefly a Screen operator. They could find out about that under hypnosis, and from that information they would know that she would almost certainly be there in a time of crisis."

Marlow nodded. "Yes, I think I see it all now. All they had to do was to implant the compulsion that under the stimulus of certain phrases she was to lower the Screen and see that it stayed lowered for as long as possible. If their message was successful in reaching her they would know about it because they would be able to detect that the Screen was down. If it didn't reach her then they could just call off their planes and try again some other time."

"Poor kid," said Hardin slowly. "I think she was quite mad when we found her. I got a look at her eyes just before she shot Justin, and I'm certain she wasn't sane. I think the shock had been too much for her."

"How do you mean?"

Hardin shrugged. "You can figure for yourself the conflict of having to do something that your whole being revolted against, but which your subconscious suddenly made overwhelmingly necessary. Something would have to snap, and logically it would be the normal personality. I think, in a way, I'm glad she died, for even had she recovered she would never have been happy again."

He reached out to the table at the side of his bed and picked up his pipe and tobacco. "Now tell me your news, Harry."

Marlow smiled lamely. "After all that, there isn't much to tell. The bomb attack fizzled out against the Screen, and the only damage was a few deafened ears. Five minutes later we blasted Vladivostock off the map, and the Federation folded up. I don't think they really considered the possibility of failure. We've ordered an armed Commonwealth mission to their capital to get full details of what's been going on. They won't refuse. We've threatened to destroy two major cities if they do. The Commonwealth will hand over all the details to us, and that will be that. True, we shan't be very popular, but then, we never have been." He smiled reminiscently. "Somehow I don't think I shall see the half-century up after all, Glen; it'll take everyone too long to get over the shock of this failure."

He rose. "If you'd been two minutes later——" He left the sentence unfinished and offered his hand wordlessly to Hardin who clasped it with an embarrassed smile. "I'm off to bed now, I've not had a wink in thirty-six hours, unlike some people I know."

"I'll see you out," said Chris crossing to the door.

"Be seeing you, Glen," said Marlow.

Hardin waved a hand in farewell and as Marlow disappeared and the door closed he relaxed against the pillows and blew a long stream of smoke towards the ceiling. He wondered in his heart if Justin would ever forgive him for killing Julie. It was what she would have wanted, he knew, to have the island safe.

THE END

NEW WORLDS

## Consistent Controversy . . .

Almost every letter we receive from our readers has some reference to the cover paintings on *New Worlds*, ranging from violent criticism to enthusiastic approval, some covers getting a fair percentage of both ends of the debate. This is only natural, and boils down to individual tastes in general. Few readers, however, realise the amount of planning and discussion which goes into the production of a cover illustration before it eventually appears as an accomplished fact on the news-stands.

The cover of each issue is our shop window to the public, and the actual design is therefore of vital interest to everyone on the staff—if the shop window isn't attractive, the customer is likely to look elsewhere !

Having chosen the story most suitable for the cover design—usually long stories have greater background detail—the MS is sent to the artist to read and rough out his ideas for the design. Sometimes these coincide with the ideas I had when I read the story, sometimes they are totally different. A process of elimination and often amalgamation of ideas then produces the main theme, and the artist proceeds to work up a colour rough so that we may get an idea of the final blend of ideas and colour. Final changes are made at this stage—they may be structural or artistic—and then the final painting goes into effect.

When this is finished the lettering is then overlaid in a suitable colour and the whole goes to the blockmaker. He proofs his final work in printing inks as near the artist's original colours as possible, sending his "progressives" (the individual proofs of the three primary colours yellow, red and blue, plus the combination of two colours), to the printer, who then matches the inks for the final printing. This production side of the cover is watched very carefully by ourselves, as a slight change of colour in the intermediate stages can make a big difference to the final look of the cover by the time you see it.

Eventually, when he is actually "running" the cover work, the printer adds a varnish to his inks which glosses up the whole picture, giving it that extra shiny effect. (One of our best covers, on No. 9, came out flat and dull because we forgot this little trick of the trade.)

Another point few of our readers realise is that *New Worlds* is the only science-fiction magazine which does not have any lettering apart from the title strip upon the cover. In fact, we are one of a very small circle of magazines which have adopted this policy. It is an item which many of us have always wanted to see exploited more fully, and when we had the opportunity we decided that our readers would have more than enough acumen to know what they were buying without a lot of wordage explaining the fact. Just to make sure that newer readers to science-fiction wouldn't miss the point, we added the sub-title "Fiction of the Future."

I shall still expect to see cover criticism, despite this editorial, so let's call it a bonus for the editor—you couldn't repay me in any better fashion.

JOHN CARNELL

*Communications will play a vital part in interplanetary travel someday. With the planets in unfavourable positions try sending an SOS to Earth via Mercury, Venus, Mars and the Moon.*

# EMERGENCY WORKING

By E. R. JAMES

Illustrated by HUNTER

Sunwards, through Space, fell the *Queen of Darkness*. Behind her, a twisting trail of globules faded into the eternal gloom. Through the white-hot wreckage of her afterpart, tongues of flame still flickered intermittently, although their full force was long since spent.

Inside the liner, after the forty-eight hours of hammering explosions, all seemed deathly still. As she spun and lifted end over end in steady motions, first golden glare, searing bright, sent shadows marching over the floor of the bridge, then cold light, white as milk, streamed in and vanished, leaving the ship's officers closed in by utter blackness.

Captain Thurston put out his swollen tongue to lick cracked lips. Seat straps still sawed at muscle and bone as he freed one arm and struck at the communications switch.

"Operator ! Operator !"

That croaking voice surely wasn't his own ? After the recent cacophony, he didn't seem to be able to hear the background hum of the communicator. He dragged himself upright, swaying in the straps, wincing.

The communicator was dead.

"Mr. Parker ! Mr. Parker !"

"Yes, sir ?" The answer came hoarsely from the darkness.

The Captain grunted. First Officers had no right to be human at times like this. "Mr. Parker ! It's over— Stir yourself, sir ! Ship's wires are dead. Get on that voice tube to Mr. McAllister. I must know if there's life in his engines."

"Yes, sir." The First Officer moaned as he struck at his straps.

Lurid light glared in.

The Captain dragged out his handkerchief and raked it across his face. "Mr. Hammond ! Get on to——"

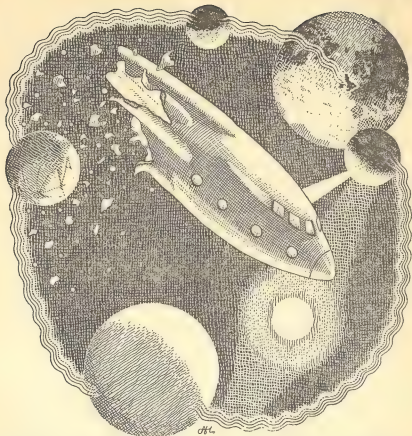
A voice tube whistled.

The Captain twisted painfully around. "See who that is."

"Yes, sir." Second Officer Hammond lurched erect. His face turned the colour of milk as the light changed. "Gyros, sir. Martin K. thinks he can stabilise ship."

Martin K—— Such familiarity. Hammond was on too friendly terms with the mechanic grades. But this wasn't the time—— "Right. Hang on





to that tube." He twisted, gasping, to stare the other way. After this, he would be thought too old for another ship. Darkness closed in. "Manet!" he bellowed.

"Mon Dieu!—Yes, sir?"

"Wait!" No use having Manet Gallicly frantic in this blackness. "Able Spaceman!"

"Sir!"

"Lights!"

"Yessir!"

Noises of stumbling feet lifted the Captain's neck hairs. Then the glare burst in. Men, frozen by the darkness, stiffened and screwed up their eyes. The emergency lights sizzled blue.

"Sir! Engines report one tube may be made serviceable."

"Thank you, Mr. Parker." One tube. Out of fifty. Great grief! What hope was there?

He lurched to his feet. Yes— Gravity holding. Thank heaven there was power for that at least. Without it, the passengers would have gone stark, raving mad.

EMERGENCY WORKING

"Right. Manet, get me the communications room standing by. Mr. Hammond, get those gyros turning. Then you and Mr. Parker go down to the passengers. Feed and water them while the crew spray smut on all outside ports. Then let the passengers out. This spectacle 'll take their minds off the past two days. Make 'em happy."

He strode, stiffly but determinedly over to the row of tubes and took his call from Manet's hand. Third Officers were useless. Couldn't loose one on the harmless passengers.

"Communications?" he asked suspiciously.

He held the tube to his ear. "Yes, sir. Trying to get electric equipment working, but there isn't much hope. Fear we're too close to the Sun for battery working, anyway. Can you align ship for helio transmission to Mercury Ob., sir?"

The floor shifted uneasily. Manet staggered sideways. Captain Thurston caught hold of a wall grip. Third Officers would never learn.

He put the tube to his mouth. Mercury Ob., indeed! Young fool in communications would persist in those damn' silly abbreviations. Good report, though. Clear. "Give me ten minutes."

Wheee!

Manet, stumbling back over the rising floor, caught up the swinging engine room tube. "Engines report they can't work while you're swinging ship."

"What engines?" scoffed the Captain. He took the tube. "You'll have to wait, McAllister. What's it look like?"

He held the tube to his ear.

"Terrible, Captain Thurr-ston. Forrtty feet of hull melted off. I've nevrren seen aught like it. I——"

"Right!" yelled the Captain. "I know you'll do the best you can!" He held the tube to his ear for a moment. Yes, McAllister had heard. A Mirr-racle seemed to be in orr-der.

Captain Thurston chuckled grimly. Gloom, now dispelled by the emergency lights, closed in coldly.

He strode over the heaving floor to his chart table. For a few moments, he scribbled. Had to make it short, to save transmission time. Now all that remained was to take a fix, and fill in the position.

"Manet!"

"Yes, sir."

"Get a sextant, and check me. My——" No, it would never do to admit one's hands shook. "It will save time, perhaps."

Above them the stars had settled. Mercury, a gigantic semi-circle, almost gibbous, shone its cold light in. They found their seconds of arc, jotted figures, checked each other, and finally the Captain nodded at the gyros' tube.

"Have ship trimmed for heliograph working, Mr. Manet."

He watched the Third Officer hurry to obey. Yes, in spite of everything, they had been lucky. The *Queen of Darkness* was a fine ship. When that fuel pipe had split and the explosion flashed back, the after bulkheads had held, although the hull had been breached. In deep Space, the great liner, even out of control, was better than those confounded safety rafts.

McAllister's lightning survey and accurate report had given them a chance.

Before the hull melted through, safety bulkheads were clamped, passengers secured, crew in quarters, and the situation was reported in to Venus.

Not that Venus would know which direction the ship had gone. Possibly, by now, the *Queen of Darkness* would have been given up as lost.

Indeed she would have been lost if McAllister hadn't foreseen the course of the disaster. Good man. Dependable. It was because of McAllister that he had taken the desperate course of securing the three main gyros and letting the ship swing about the emergency pilot gyro amidships, only gently braking on it.

Anyone within a million miles, looking with the means to see, would have thought them a giant catherine wheel.

He looked up as the ruddy-gold glare of the too-near Sun slanted into the bridge. Even through the vizor one could feel that radiant heat from Solar explosions only forty million miles away.

McAllister couldn't be blamed for the crazy movements of the ship . . .

Well, the passengers would be picked up by craft from the Mercury Station, but the ship . . .

Speed, after the prolonged, uncontrolled acceleration of burning fuel and Solar pull, approached 1,000 miles per second. For such a giant ship, that speed meant a mass, by Einstein's law, that he did not care to work out. Could anything save her from completing her trajectory into the primal fires of Solar energy?

He sighed. Such a wonderful ship. Running her had been a joy——

"Alignment completed, sir," said Manet suddenly.

Captain Thurston started. He dropped the message into the compressed air tube. *Thl-unk* ! It was gone.

Slowly the ship's helio, moving automatically to allow for the velocity of the liner, flickered out its message.

Light flashes sped their seven million-mile journey through the void.

On Mercury, in the Twilight Belt Observation Station, the duty operator, Sammy Rustein, took his fingers off the morse key of the W/T link with Venus. The transformers, relieved of their transmission load, ceased their uneasy grind. He grinned and sat back, feeling for his cigarettes.

It was against the Rules and Regs. to use transmission for chatting; but to heck with the batteries. Stuck in this concrete box on top of the station with yourself for six hours; papers six months old; no TV; radio broadcasts unintelligible in the Solar interference for eight months in the year; a fellow had to say something to someone.

He lit the cigarette and glanced at the Ob. clock. Eight minutes before he could expect to know the result of the Test Match.

He was reaching for a quick read, when the helio warning buzzed. Heck ! The Chief would be out a few miles off again, spotlighting the photon cell to see how quick he could answer.

He knocked down the receiver key and took the pencil from behind his ear. The flashes were rapid for the Old Man. Three short, three long, three short.

S.O.S.

EMERGENCY WORKING

This was a new one for the Chief.

E... m... e... r... g... Pause.

Emergency working. Then—it wasn't the Chief. He sat up, struck at the transcriber key, clicked over the automatic sender, waited five seconds for it to align the giant mirrors and pressed "Am receiving you clear," and kept his finger down.

The winking light swallowed his attention. His finger came off the sending button and felt for the General Alarm.

He heard it howling through the concrete mass of the Station.

Dr. Borone headed the rush up the narrow steps. To the ears of a communications man, footfalls were like signatures. He could feel them waiting.

The message began to repeat itself. It would come through three times. But he'd got it—let alone the transcriber.

He turned. "It's the *Queen of Darkness*, sir."

"Right!" Borone's white face bobbed. He took the message and his eyes narrowed as he read. He turned around. "All ships' parties prepare to take off. Full fuel load. Skeleton staff to remain. Five minutes' warning to take off."

Feet pelted down the dusty steps. The odour of Mercunian concrete rose in the still, stuffy air.

Dr. Borone crossed to the communications charts. "Earth out of contact, of course?"

"Other side of the Sun, sir."

"Mars?"

"Too far for us."

"Have to be Venus, then. Send it as it stands with our preface. Priority: for Immediate Action. Add: Deal as able and pass on at once. Got that?"

Sammy, scribbling, nodded. Before the Chief had left, he had sent acknowledgment on its seven-second journey to the *Queen of Darkness*, had switched No. 2 Venus frequency to emergency working and was hammering at the key.

He did not see the Chief's fleeting smile.

He only noticed his smouldering cigarette when the automatic repetition began. He inhaled, while his eyes shifted anxiously over his meters and dials. Hell! The Chief hadn't noticed the breach of regs. in the excitement.

Then he was frowning again. With the planets in their present position, it was four minutes to Venus, and four minutes back.

Just about that time, the Governor-General of Venus, Lord Carver, put down the latest report on the Polar Sulphur Fields and sat back in his chair. Something would have to be done to replace the machinery lost in the holds of the *Queen of Darkness*. With conditions as they were under the evaporation domes, a strike was likely any time. Big wages weren't everything. He knew how those men felt—even if Earth did not.

Delays in the departments concerned had been bad enough already. Only one thing to do. He picked up the handset of his telephone.

"I want to speak to World Organisation, Earth, a person-to-person call to Colonial Secretary Leakey."

"Yes, sir," replied the voice in his ear. "Priority, sir?"

"Of course." Lord Carver tapped his finger nails on the desk. "As soon



as possible."

"Hold the line, please." There were several clicks, then the smooth voice of the operator continued. "Calling, Calling Mars. Calling Mars. Top priority call via you for Earth Central Spacial Communications." The voice cut off mysteriously, then returned. "I have passed your request, sir. Delay in transmission—via Mars owing to orbital positions of planets—is about fourteen minutes. We can expect acknowledgment from Mars in about twelve, and an answer from your call in about thirty minutes. I will call you back, sir."

"Very well——"

Lord Carver stiffened. The line had gone dead. He almost flung the handset back into place. Thirty minutes. And, when he did get through, he would speak into that little hole, his voice would leave Venus as radio waves bound for Mars. Mars would re-transmit his voice as soon as they received it, and on it would travel, getting more and more distorted, to Moon Base. Moon Base would finish the beaming down to Earth. Earth would pick up the voice, what was left of it, and send it as electrical impulses down a wire to the Secretary, who would probably listen to a transcription of it at his leisure. He would have to reply, of course, to such a message, if he understood it. A reply would come back through the same channels and he, Lord Carver, would be called from his dinner to listen to it, or a played back transcription of it.

The telephone buzzed. Devil take it! What was wrong, now? More delays? He clamped it to his ear and opened his mouth to snap.

"Emergency!" said a new voice. Sounded like that Spaniard fellow on listening watch. "Emergency working!" it said. "Message from Mercury Ob. Four minutes, three seconds transmission delay. W/T working. The *Queen of Darkness* . . ." The Governor-General was on his feet before the end of the actual message. The moment the Spaniard's excited voice said: "Message ends. This is an all-authority emergency hook-up," he slammed down the receiver.

The Spaniard wondered foolishly whether he had finished his clandestine message to Mercury. He couldn't remember. But—those poor devils in the liner. *Nom de Dios!*

The recently cleared channel to Mars was already alive with the message. Ships were alerted: all kinds of craft. Lord Carver cut through the red tape of a meeting. "Three tugs. Admiral Blane, you choose them. And get your best man on the fastest destroyer you can get. That's all. There's not a chance in a thousand we'll be in time, but send them, anyway. Perhaps Borone'll want help with his overloaded ships."

In due course, the message startled Mars. Nothing they could do, getting on for a hundred million miles from the *Queen of Darkness*. Time was too short.

Tacked with the briefest of prefaces, bang in the middle of a routine stores demand for fresh fruit, the message sped with the speed of light after Earth, hurtling in her orbit forty degrees angle Mars-Sun-Earth.

Emergency working. It fed into directional aerials on Moon Base, was separated from the fruit and slammed down to Earth Spacial Communications No. 2; No. 1 being on the opposite side of the planet.

EMERGENCY WORKING

Split in all directions, all authorities heard of it within two minutes of its arrival at Moon Base. It intruded with shocking force into the middle of a conversation between Communications Controller Hobart and Mr. Prain, Under Secretary to the Chancellor of the Exchequer:

"But, Mr. Prain, I know I have exceeded the Budget estimates. It proved vitally necessary to establish helio workings on the Mercury Station——"

"Yes, so I see. But the estimates were for——"

The final "All informed" of the message tied them both spellbound for a moment. Then both were hammering at the cut-off in the handset rests of their respective instruments. The telecasts should know of this triumph of communications. It would help those estimates for next year. Pity to have to capitalise on disaster. But that was the function of communication. And that official statement on cuts in the Communications Administration must not get into the newscasts. Good heavens, no. Public opinion wouldn't stand it now. Have to think of some other way of saving public money. That ship? What would happen to the passengers? Mr. Prain's daughter was on board.

Meanwhile, the TV screens of a world pictured dramatic announcers.

And, in the Space Rescue Department of the Astronautical Research Establishment, Commander Marrin gave up looking for a way of getting rescue ships from the other side of the System, or from the two wrecks, one over Earth one almost lost in outer space.

He brooded for a moment, looking out through the windows of his lofty office at the lines of huge white buildings. Had they nothing here, or in the multi-billion pound rescue stations spanning the entire System that would help?

If only the ship was a few million miles further out. They had used gravitational forces to change the course of wrecked ships before. Nothing useful existed beyond Mercury. Mercury was the inmost planet, and it was hurtling away from the wreck, already too far distant to be of the slightest use.

Yes, there was one faint hope. He ran across his silent office and cut in the inter-building televisor. "Get me Orbits."

"Orbits here."

"This is Marrin . . ."

The screen flickered and glowed, showing the inside of a long room lined with calculators and busy operators. Evidently they'd not yet heard——

"Emergency!" barked Marrin. "Show me the latest Solar Diagram. Rush!"

"Yes, sir." Faces were turning now. One girl had jumped from her desk and was seizing up a frame diagram.

Commander Marrin held his breath as she ran towards the screen. It was a good thing that the Solar System was comparatively flat. Three-dimensional screens hadn't been perfected yet; screens saved time.

She held up the frame.

"That dot!" snapped Marrin. "That dot inside the orbit of Mercury——"

"Icarus, sir?"

"That's it. Icarus." That tiny, unique world, whose orbit passed within that of Mercury and then swept out astonishingly to beyond the orbit of distant Mars, was, by a miracle, somewhere near the liner. He held up the message form. "I want computations based on these figures—— No, it'll

save time to get them from Ship Prediction. They'll have been informed. The *Queen of Darkness* has stabilised herself and reports about to cut the orbit of Mercury. She'll be across it by now, perhaps."

He paused for breath. "You've got to come up with figures of stress and thrust and gravity pulls and mass equations that'll pull the *Queen* out of her dive Sunwards. Make it fast. We've no means of knowing if her crew and passengers can be got off. Right?"

"Right, sir!"

The frame was swept away. The girl went running back to her desk. The Orbits Supervisor was picking up a telephone.

"Ship Prediction. Hurry. Priority: *Queen of Darkness*!"

Priority: *Queen of Darkness*! Magic passwords. Wires carried messages and pictures back and forth as departments, routine forgotten, co-operated in the fight against time.

Figures reached Commander Marrin less than two seconds before they climbed to Spacial Communications Division on the Moon.

Space Radio Operator Joan Bailey thought her heart would stop as she fed the sounds into the booster of Earth-Mars Link No. 6. She'd never known a Link to be kept open so long.

While the vital words and figures, hopeful symbols, crept across the macrocosm, Communications Controller Hobart felt slightly guilty over a certain satisfaction as he passed the news to a frantic Mr. Prain.

On Mars, an Irishman, sick to death of routine orders, picked up the signal with an efficiency no one had thought him capable of and shot it off again.

Governor-General Lord Carver listened to it going through Venus. His delayed call came through from Earth at the same time, and he found he had forgotten what he had meant to say. Who was he supposed to be talking to?

Before he could remember, the local operator cut in without ceremony with the news that the Captain of the *Queen of Darkness* had put off the passengers on space rafts. The fleet of little ships from Mercury expected to make contact with them quite soon, for the rafts had been exploded rearwards. That would further increase the *Queen's* wild dive—and the crew were still on board.

The Spaniard sent the message hurtling on across the vastness. Morse-key pips and peeps battled through the Solar interference, three times repeated.

The rescue tugs got it first, ugly things shuddering with all-out thrust; the space-ripping destroyer's crew forgot some of their discomfort, as it caught them up and rang through the ship's loudspeaker system; mixed up with the clatter and din of atmospherics, it finally reached the aerial above the square concrete box of the Mercury Ob.

The relief operator, Joe Slade, had come up, having slept through all the din, but not through his own alarm clock gadget. He and Sammy struggled with the morse together. Together in the silence of the deserted concrete warren they sorted out the message and then aligned the giant mirrors. First they winked it towards the falling liner; now after the little craft hurtling to cut her off.

Accelerate. Accelerate. The human form wobbled like jelly under such

stress. The little craft, never designed for such work, shuddered and groaned.

Decelerate. Decelerate. The single rocket tube of the *Queen of Darkness* poked out like the red lead of a stellar pencil. McAllister had it rigged with string—so the Captain thought.

He had crewmen in spacesuits shifting out the cargo, exploding it ahead of them. For a while the speed had even decreased, but the single rocket tube alone could not beat the drag of the Sun.

A whistling tube told him of the end of that. He looked at Manet; Manet forgot he was a mere Third Officer and looked at the Captain.

The glare filled the bridge. Captain Thurston dashed the sweat from his face. Heat. It would consume the ship, within hours.

A speaking tube whistled. He took it from the Duty Spaceman's sweating hand.

"Passengers picked up, sir. Contact with Mercury craft expected in about three hours."

"Right."

But what could little ships like those do, at that late stage?

He listened to the whisper of the great engines, turning over as slowly as McAllister could operate them, and as fast as he dared, too, with that single tube.

A liner like this took four years to build. Only the best of man's skills was good enough for the rigors of Space; only the finest of his materials. How many man hours of careful work she represented he did not know. But he could remember his swelling pride when she was handed over to him after her trials. A wonderful ship. He could remember the ceremony in every detail.

"Prepare to abandon ship," he choked.

Manet leant towards him. "What's that?"

"What!" Third officers had no discipline! Parker and Hammond wouldn't have forgotten the customary "Sir." Ought to have put Manet off on a raft in place of one of them.

Then the communications tube whistled again. The Captain started. Ah, she was reprieved, if only for moments. He looked around the glare-splashed bridge as he set the tube to his ear. Men must come before metal. It would take an hour to cut the main mass of the ship away and ride the engines.

"Sir! There's a chance!"

"What?" He waited blindly, then remembered to put the tube to his mouth. "Yes?"

"Message from Earth . . ."

From Earth. The Captain listened with bated breath.

Suddenly he thrust the tube at the waiting spaceman, and turned.

"Manet! We've forgotten Icaurus. She's ahead of us. Get your instruments, man." He reached his chart table without conscious movement. Manet bent over it as the Captain wrote the figures burned into his mind.

"Our position needs correcting . . ."

"Yes." The Captain reached for his sextant. "We've got a little advantage on them. Exploding away those machines did it . . ."

The ship fell silent under the news, waiting. Then the Captain was howling orders into one speaking tube, and Manet screeching into another. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the great hulk lifted, closer and closer to where Icaurus was thought to be.

Anxiously the Captain and Manet checked and rechecked their position.

"Something's drawing us, sir. I'd swear it!"

"Yes, I think you're——"

"Sir! What if we collide with Icaur——"

"Don't be a fool!" Only a very young Third Officer would have been capable of such a thought. In all those billions upon billions of cubic miles, it was not possible that their figuring could be so accurate, nor that that single tube would lift them so high into the Solar plane.

"Look!"

The Captain looked. A shadow was creeping into the gigantic, flaming orb of the Sun.

Yes, they would pass very close. The little mass of Icaurus would not pull them out of the dive, but it would certainly swing them around into something more like an orbital motion around the Sun.

Because of that brief respite, the little ships would be in time. Their magnetic grapples would ring upon the hull. The promised destroyer would help. And the tugs would turn the tide of disaster. Like heavenly horses in harness, they would draw the *Queen of Darkness* out of the jaws of doom.

The shadow of Icaurus grew upon the lurid-painted bridge.

It was all over, except for the hard work.

Captain Thurston glanced at the young man beside him. "Thank you, Mr. Manet. You've done very well . . . for a Third Officer."

THE END

## THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Charles Gray, who had that delightful little short entitled "Precedent" in the May issue, has his first long story in the next issue. "Unwanted Heritage" is a story about Venus—one that will make quite an impression, too. It gets a Reina Bull cover as an added mark of respect.

Apart from the final part of "The Esp Worlds," which reaches a terrific climax in quite an unexpected manner, there will also be an intriguing "alien-hunt" story, "Of Those Who Came," by George Longdon, "Where No Man Walks," by E. R. James, which I think will be one of the year's outstanding shorts, and a Time story "Weapons For Yesterday" by new author Stewart Winsor.

The May ratings worked out:

- |                     |       |                  |
|---------------------|-------|------------------|
| 1. Performance Test | .. .. | John K. Aiken    |
| 2. Home Is The Hero | .. .. | E. C. Tubb       |
| 3. Breaking Point   | .. .. | John Christopher |
| 4. Precedent        | .. .. | Charles Gray     |
| 5. Hideaway         | .. .. | Peter Hawkins    |

The first two stories were very close, and the other three battled desperately for the rest of the honours.

EMERGENCY WORKING



*The Martians had a completely alien culture; as entities were incomprehensible to Earthmen—even their toys defied the thought processes of visitors.*

# THE BROKEN RECORD

By JAMES MACGREGOR

Illustrated by QUINN

Stout Cortez and all his men, looking at each other with a wild surmise—silent, upon a peak in Darien—weren't half as wild as the first man who landed on Mars and had a good look at the natives. In fact, the discovery of the Pacific was a small thing in comparison with that first sight of the Martians.

Those Earthmen (more specifically, two Americans, a Scot and a Spanish-American Pole of Russian extraction) would not have been surprised if the Martians were utterly inhuman, and they would not have been really surprised if they were human.

But it was obvious that someone was playing a joke on them when they saw the Martians were something like fairies.

Later scientists, having to say something, postulated an earlier connection between Martians and Terrans that explained the persistence of fairies, gnomes, goblins and dwarfs in Terran legend. They tore up most of the books on anthropology and suggested that the human race started on Mars, had to shift, went to Earth and evolved there, leaving a few behind, who didn't have to evolve.

That has very little to do with David and Dorothy Barnes. This was long after space travel had become commonplace. The two Americans, the Scot and the Spanish-American Pole of Russian extraction were all dead, alas, and it had become clear that if the Martians were a practical joke, it was being carried far past the time for the belly-laughs and the knee-slapping and the offers of exploding cigars.

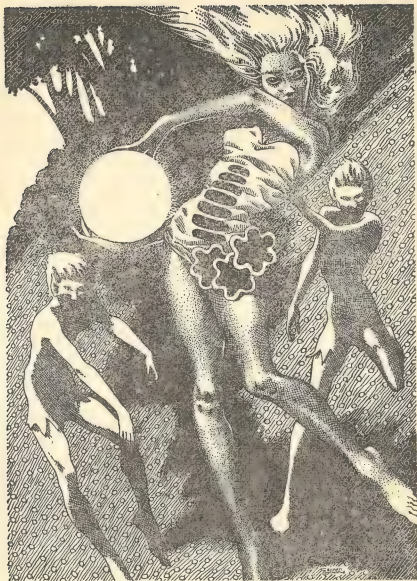
Oddly enough, though they had had a spacecar for years, David and Dorothy had never been to Mars. It was one of the things to which they had never got around to.

## I

"Well, with only a week left, we ought to be further than just *talking*, dear," said Dorothy.

"All right," said David.

"You've got to have things *arranged*, darling, or you waste so much time. And you've only three weeks. My idea was, now we have the cruiser, we might go to Mars and just camp out there, like pioneers. It's . . ."



"All right," said David again. In the end he usually left things like this to Dorothy. But she didn't seem to realise there was no argument, and still tried hard to convince him.

"It's lovely, they tell me. But you don't have to believe me. Read about it in the book. Here." She handed him the guide, open at the place, and stood back demurely, her hands clasped behind her, like a child waiting to be congratulated. David looked at the book. Everything that had ever been

said about Mars, before anyone went there, was quite wrong. Mars wasn't a frozen world, it was a world with the climate of California—because of the ether current, said the book triumphantly (a sort of interplanetary Gulf Stream).

There were pictures of friendly landscapes, like North Canada in summer. They couldn't keep on going to Venus every year. "It might be worse," remarked David grudgingly.

"Oh, David, I knew you'd like it," said Dorothy gratefully. "Then we'll go?"

David, by this time, was set on going to Mars. The fishing, the book said, was wonderful. "If you want to go," he said, "I suppose I can stand it."

For a while Dorothy was rapturous. Then she got down to business . . . "We can take six altogether," she said thoughtfully, "and what I thought was—let's make it a *young* party. Everyone between eighteen and twenty-five. There's John Morgan and Nancy Rotar . . ."

David surveyed her with amusement as she talked. She was twenty-eight. What exactly was the psychology behind her eighteen to twenty-five line-up? Did it mean just that that would make her twenty-five—or better still, twenty-one? Or was she going to be everybody's mother, the woman of the world, not old—heavens, no—but more experienced than her guests, able to look after them and be kind and understanding?

Dorothy had been fascinating and beautiful when he married her seven years ago, and since she wouldn't change noticeably for nearly forty years, she probably still was. So the change, David thought, must be in him. She was still something to be proud of, something to show off and have other men envy, and he was of course very fond of her, but . . .

"What was that?" he said absently.

"I said Jacky Greene, dear," Dorothy repeated. "She would complete the party. You always avoid her, but she's quite a nice girl."

"Oh, ask her if you like," said David carelessly. "I leave things like that to you."

## II

John was at the manual controls as the cruiser swung over the planet in a long arc for a landing. He was the typical big, lazy, good-natured college boy. He had left college, but he would always slouch lazily about, when he could, in that yellow sweater with the big "F" in purple silk back and front. He would always have that thick unruly hair standing up like untrimmed gorse, even when it was white instead of sandy. He would always have perfect teeth and smile that slow, easy smile that seemed to spread from his face over his whole body.

Not everyone had a big space cruiser that was more comfortable than most houses. Most people who owned one were like children with expensive toys, spending most of every flight at the controls and watching jealously when anyone else was trying the feel of the ship. Not so David. He liked his turn at the controls, and he could handle the ship competently enough, but when someone else was willing and able to take over a tricky landing David was happy to stand back and let him do it. John was handling the cruiser beautifully.

"Shouldn't we drop a little, John?" asked Dorothy anxiously. Even in a space cruiser she was a back-seat driver.

"John knows what he's doing, honey," said David easily. "He's saving about two hundred dollars' worth of fuel by landing on gravity and air resistance. A liner pilot couldn't do it better."

John smiled slowly, happily, at the compliment.

"But why land in the dark?" asked Jacky. She was twenty-two, a blonde, Grade A home-wrecker. She and Dorothy were both wearing slacks. In Dorothy's case it was a mistake. But Jacky never made mistakes with clothes. She wore fawn creased slacks just to show she could do it, David thought, and that Dorothy couldn't.

"We're not landing in the dark," said David patiently. "We're in an upward curve that will lift us again in the twilight zone. Then we'll drop gently where it's still day. We'll have an hour or two to get settled before it's dark."

They landed as neatly as anyone could wish, in a beautiful valley that had all the variety of Earth's finest landscapes. To the north and west were uplands, rising slowly almost from the spot where they touched down; to the east was a thick forest split by a blue lake, with a thin mist over it, where four streams met; to the south, the valley stretched away, bisected by one of the streams, to distant, red-and-grey hills.

"The edge of the forest will be perfect for our camp," said Dorothy. "Look—nobody here! Isn't that lovely? Have we time to put up the tents before it's dark?"

"Not to-night," said David decidedly. "To-night we sleep in the cruiser."

"Oh, all right. But we must at least have a look round. I want to see the fairies. But perhaps the fairies go where the people are, near all the big camps and holiday towns——"

"Then we can do without the fairies," said David. It was a world as friendly as the guide-book said, with a tropical temperature, no insects, and air like wine.

### III

The sun was directly overhead, and Jacky was testing a heavy Earth tan against its burning rays.

"You're sure Dorothy won't go into your tent?" David asked.

"To her it's a crime to disturb anyone's sleep," said Jacky. "She won't disturb me, and she'll see nobody else does. I can slip back when they're busy with lunch."

They were a mile from the camp, lying in the hollow top of a little hill. Jacky had thrown her white skirt on the hot grass and was sunbathing in a silf swimsuit which seemed alive as it analysed the sunlight like a prism. Now it was green shot with yellows and blues; now white with purple, luminous shadows; now crimson with grey and orange dancing across it—always glossy, always in contrast with her golden-brown skin, for brown had been cut out of its range for just that purpose.

"And anyway," she went on, "even if she does notice anything here, it will pass as a holiday affair. She couldn't have suspected anything or she wouldn't have asked me."

"But we'd have to be much more careful afterwards."

"We can't really be much more careful than we've been up to now. Does

Dorothy . . . I mean, does she go her own way too? I've never heard anything."

It wasn't necessary for her to explain the meaning of the phrase "go her own way." "I don't think so," said David uncomfortably. "I think I'd feel better if she did."

"Wouldn't you mind?"

"I don't know. The question never arose."

They lay silent for a while, David still watching the play of light on Jacky's silf outfit. Theoretically if she stayed absolutely still and the light didn't vary, the same colour-scheme should persist. He had seen it in fashion showroom displays. But though she was relaxed on the grass, she could never be motionless enough to capture and keep one hue. Her slow breathing kept her halter flashing through the colours, and the minute rippling of her diaphragm was imparted to the trunks at her waist and drew them inexorably through the colours of the rainbow and more.

"Look," said Jacky suddenly, excitedly, but David was intent on the incredible change of hue at her slight movement. "There are fairies around here after all."

He whirled then, and for a moment could see nothing in the bright sunlight. Then he saw the fairy shapes.

They were just under four feet tall. Their legs were long and slim, their bodies light and elfin, their chins pointed. There were about a dozen of them, and they were dancing.

David jumped to his feet.

"Oh, don't move," Jacky exclaimed. "They run away when you go near them. No one's ever caught one of them."

"I'm not trying to catch them," said David. "I just want to have a good look at them."

The fairies—there was nothing else to call them, they looked so like the illustrations in children's books—didn't let him come too close. When he was about a hundred yards from them they danced away. They were in a sort of ring, paying no attention to him or Jacky, but when he approached they drifted away, and when he stopped, they stopped. They were throwing a pink crystal to each other like a medicine ball. But the crystal wasn't heavy. It floated slowly in the air like a balloon.

David ran as fast as he could towards them, but they kept their distance easily. Then suddenly he stopped, wondering if they were trying to lead him away from Jacky. Fairy stories of lost princesses came to his mind. He went back. The fairies promptly returned to where they had first seen them.

"They don't want to be friends," he told Jacky.

But she was thinking of something else. "We'll have to tell the others about them," she said, "if they haven't seen them already. That's awkward."

"No," said David. "You slip back and then I'll come into camp alone. I don't have to say you were with me."

"All right." She rose in a sudden riot of colour, so dazzling in motion that David looked away, or at her face or arms or long brown legs, anywhere but at the seething, shining whirlpool of colour. Then she fastened her skirt about her waist and hurried off in the direction of the camp.

The fairies ignored her. They went on with their inscrutable game with the pink crystal.

## IV

John and David were fishing.

"David," said John reflectively, "do you think you're treating Dorothy quite right?"

David caught his breath, but tried to say casually: "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. You know if you were really forced into it, you'd never actually prefer Jacky to Dorothy. Maybe it's none of my business, but . . ."

"You're right," said David coldly.

"Oh, well. Just thought I'd mention it. I thought perhaps you hadn't really considered it seriously. I mean, sooner or later you'll have to choose between them. And of course you'll choose Dorothy, because you're not a fool. But maybe it will be too late then—and anyway, it will never be quite the same."

David searched wildly for something to say. He found it.

"Look," he exclaimed. "There they are."

On the other side of the lake the fairies were dancing again and playing their game with the crystal.

"Why, you're right," John exclaimed. "They *are* fairies."

He rose to go to them, round the lake.

"It's no use," David told him. "They won't let you come near them."

"Then let's go back. See if they come nearer us. Maybe they'll swim across."

They moved back a few yards. None of the fairies seemed to be looking at them, but they closed the gap. The two men goggled at them.

"They're dancing *on* the water!" David exclaimed.

They could see the ripples where the little feet touched. The fairies sank into the water a little, but that was all.

"That can't be all they displace," murmured David. "Besides, how do they balance? They've no wings . . ."

"They must be a different form of matter," said John. "Water is quite solid to them."

"Another thing. That's a strange game they're playing. Do you see, when one of them catches the crystal, he wavers. Sort of disappears for a moment. It does something to him, catching it. I don't see what it is."

"Let's go back to the camp," said John. "Maybe they'll follow us and the others can see them."

They started back. The fairies, still paying no attention to them, drifted after them.

## V

It was night, but not dark. Mars had two moons, and there was no two-hundred-mile blanket of air to cut off the light of the stars. They made a vast lacy tracery of fairy lights.

"Nobody will go near my tent," said Jacky, "but are you sure Dorothy won't know you're gone?"

"I told her I'd a slight temperature and would sleep on the ship," said David. "She's desperately afraid of catching anything. She'll worry about me, but she'll leave me alone."

They were in a little clearing in the forest, fully two miles from the camp.



They had run together through the night, laughing, but softly, for in the stillness sounds carried easily.

"So we're all right," said Jacky.

"John Morgan knows," said David.

"Him?" Jacky stared at him. "Will he . . ."

"He'll never say a word to Dorothy. Whatever happens. He spoke to me, and he may talk to you, but he won't bring Dorothy into it."

"Oh."

Even the night on Mars was tropical. They both wore only shirts and shorts, and were warm. The ether current, David thought wisely.

He caught Jacky by the shoulders and looked into eyes that were grey in the strong, warm light. Gradually she moved against him. The hot night became perceptibly hotter. It was one of those moments at which time chastely stood still. David heard a sound and ignored it—heard it again and whirled round, letting Jacky free.

It was the fairies again. They were dancing at their usual distance. David heard the faint twittering he had heard twice before.

He cursed. "Never mind them," said Jacky impatiently. "They never bother us. They never bother anyone who comes here."

Insanely David ran at them, trying to drive them off. They melted away, but when he returned to Jacky they were back. Her shirt and her light shorts gleamed in the dusk while the rest of her merged with the shadows behind.

"Look out," screamed Jacky as he reached her. "They're throwing something."

He turned and saw the pink crystal sailing towards them.

"It can't hurt us," he said. "I can catch it, the way they do."

"Leave it alone!" Jacky exclaimed.

"It might be dangerous if it's not handled gently. But I'll be careful."

He stood below it as it dropped and took it gently in both hands.

### III

The sun was directly overhead, and Jacky was testing a heavy Earth tan against its burning rays.

"You're sure Dorothy won't go into your tent?" David asked.

"To her it's a crime to disturb anyone's sleep," said Jacky. "She won't disturb me, and she'll see no one else does. I can slip back when they're busy with lunch."

They were a mile from the camp, lying in the hollow top of a little hill. Jacky had thrown her white skirt on the hot grass and was sunbathing in a silf swimsuit.

Was silf such a good idea, David wondered? It was always so much more beautiful than the girl who wore it. No one could compete with that flashing, dazzling riot of colour. Not even Jacky.

"The trouble with sunbathing," he said lazily, "is that you're too hot to kiss."

"What a thing to say to a girl!" she exclaimed, laughing. "Anyway, you're just as hot."

"It's not so bad when you don't move."

They lay in silence for a long time, David content to shut his eyes and



let his mind wander.

"Look," said Jacky suddenly. "There are fairies around here after all."

"I'm not surprised," he retorted, not opening his eyes. "They tell you there are pyramids in Egypt, and when you go there, lo and behold, there are."

"Look, David," said Jacky.

He looked. They were dancing and throwing a pink crystal to each other. It looked like a huge pink diamond, except that no diamond floated in the air like that.

"Aren't you going to do anything?" asked Jacky.

"What—try to talk to them? They'd only run away."

"We'll have to tell the others about them, if they haven't seen them already. That's awkward."

"No," said David, wondering why she didn't see the obvious. "You slip back and then I'll come into camp alone."

"All right." She rose and picked up her skirt, but David was watching the fairies curiously, puzzled.

#### IV

"David," said John reflectively as they were fishing.

"No," interrupted David, "I don't."

"Eh?"

"You were going to talk to me about Jacky, and ask whether I thought I was treating Dorothy right. Well, I don't. But that's all there is to it. Keep out of it. It'll work out all right."

"So long as you're thinking about it," said John coolly. "I thought you weren't. You're not a bad chap, David. Not the sort to give your wife a raw deal. Not unless you were determined not to see that that was what you were doing."

"I know what I'm doing."

There was silence for a moment, then—"Are those the fairies you were talking about?" asked John.

"That's them. Don't look so interested. They're just like children trying to get attention. Ignore them, and we may find out more about them." He yawned.

"If it matters," he added indifferently.

#### V

It was night, but not dark. Mars had two moons . . .

"Nobody will disturb me," said Jacky, "but what about you?"

"I told Dorothy I had a temperature," said David. "She thinks I'm sleeping on the ship."

There was a period of awkwardness. They knew why they were there, each knew the other knew, knew the other knew that he knew, *ad infinitum*. It was enough to make anyone nervous, and feel a little foolish.

David caught Jacky by the shoulders, feeling as if fifty cameras were on them. Jacky didn't do anything. Rebelling against the obviousness of it all, David seized her suddenly and crushed her against him as if they had only a few seconds of life left.

And as he had almost known would happen, he heard the twittering. He didn't need to turn.

"I'm not making love in public," he said furiously.

"Never mind them," said Jacky, just as angrily.

David ran at them savagely, skimming the ground like a deer, in a wild effort to touch them just once. But it was hopeless. He stumbled back to Jacky. It was darker, and her white shirt and shorts picked her out against

the shadows.

"Look out," said Jacky, but without excitement. "They're throwing something."

"Let them."

He didn't look round, but just for an instant he felt a light touch on his shoulder.

## II

The sun was directly overhead.

"Sure Dorothy won't go into your tent?" asked David.

"Quite," said Jacky briefly.

She was sunbathing in a silk swimsuit. It was a mistake, David thought. She was just a girl, after all, and he had seen millions of girls. Why should anyone look at tanned flesh, just like any other tanned flesh, with that colour-symphony going on? And why even look at the colour-symphony, for that matter?

There was nothing to say. David had a feeling it had all been said before—and not only by him, but by every married man playing around with another girl. They just lay and frizzled in the sun.

"Look," said Jacky suddenly.

"I know. The fairies."

"How do you know? We've never seen them."

"Probably saw them looking into the tent in my sleep. Then forgot about it."

"They've got a bigger crystal this time," said Jacky absently. "Bigger and blue."

"Now you're at it," remarked David. "When have you seen them with a crystal before?"

"I don't know. I just thought it would be smaller, and pink. I've no idea why."

She didn't suggest trying to communicate with the fairies. She knew it would be no use, too. She didn't think it awkward that they should have seen the fairies for the first time when they were together. She knew what to do.

## IV

"David," said John reflectively as they were fishing. Then he smiled crookedly. "No, I don't have to say it, do I. You know what I mean."

"Yes, I know," said David. "I won't say it's none of your business, because maybe in a way it is. But I don't think you have to worry about it."

"No. You wouldn't go wrong for long, David. But I thought maybe you'd need a little . . . reminder."

"Maybe I did," David admitted. "Come away before those damned fairies frighten all the fish away by dancing on the water."

## V

It was night, but not dark.

"Nobody will disturb me," said Jacky, "but what about you?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm beginning to wonder if anything matters."

"One thing always does." She said the word softly. "Love."

"Love?" exclaimed David. "What's that?"

His arms were on her shoulders. Perhaps she had put them there—but really, she didn't seem much more interested in the whole business than he was. They were, in a sense, playing out time.

He caught her and crushed her against him in an honest endeavour to break her ribs.

Behind him there was a twittering.

"Of course," he said dully. He didn't look at the fairies. He tried to lull them into a belief that he didn't know they were there. Then he suddenly leapt backwards, twisting in the air, and was running when his feet touched the ground.

It didn't make the least difference. He recognised the fact, gave up the chase, and returned to Jacky. He hardly needed the gleam of her light clothes to know where she would be.

"I think," she said tiredly as he came up to her, "they're throwing something."

He grabbed her wildly and ran, not looking behind him, taking a curving course. He felt something strike his shoulder just the same.

# I

"... further than just talking, dear," said Dorothy.

"All right," said David.

"You've got to have things *arranged*, darling, or you waste so much time. And you've only three weeks. Now my idea was, now we have the cruiser, we might go to Mars and just camp out there, like pioneers. It's..."

"Mars?" said David. "I've heard of the place."

"It's lovely, they tell me. Venus is quite *passé* now. Everyone goes to Mars. Once, anyway—"

"Then there's something wrong with it," said David flatly, "and we'll go somewhere else."

"But..."

"Dorothy, it isn't often I put my foot down, but it's down now. We're not going to Mars. Is that clear?"

"All right, dear," said Dorothy with her usual docility. "We'll just go to Venus, like last year."

"At least we know what to expect there."

"That's true, dear. We can take six altogether..."

David didn't listen. Dorothy had been fascinating and beautiful when he married her seven years ago. But not every husband, he thought proudly, could say his wife seemed to grow more fascinating and beautiful as time went by. He could.

"What was that?" he said absently.

"I said Jacky Greene, dear," Dorothy repeated. "She would complete the party."

"Dorothy," said David quietly, "I nearly always do what you say, don't I? But I might as well tell you here and now"—his voice rose—"that if you ask that little bitch I'm staying right here at home!"

"Very well, darling," said Dorothy docilely. "I know you always avoid her, but she's really quite a nice girl."



*Presumably every Garden of Eden will have its serpent, even one on the Moon. In this story the serpent was the unwitting tool of the plants in the garden.*

# THE SERPENT

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Illustrated by HUNTER

His name was Adam Ormandy, and he was a gardener. He was a big man, a fraction of an inch over six feet tall, and broad to match. His hair was yellow, and he usually had at least one day's stubble softening the strong lines of his not unhandsome jaw. His eyes were of that mild blue so often, and so erroneously, associated with men who work in the open air. His face and his hands were deeply tanned—he, as well as his plants, derived benefit from the ultra violet lamps so essential to vegetable well-being.

When his shift was over he liked nothing so much as a long walk. After his walk he would make for the Colony's bar—the one reserved for the use of minor technicians—and there drink two, never more nor less, of fruit squash undiluted by any form of alcohol. He did not approve of drinking but he liked occasional company. He would play one game of darts with Delchev and Gruen, both tractor drivers, and Dombey, one of the junior cartographers. He would then retire to his little room in the single men's quarters and, before sleeping, browse through the pages of the latest seed catalogues and dream wistfully of the plants that he would grow if only Ferson, Head Gardener and Air Conditioning Engineer, would allow him lights and tanks for his own use and only a few ounces of personal mass on the next ship.

THE SERPENT



His meals he had, always, in the tank rooms during his shift—packets of thick sandwiches cut and wrapped by Mary Blair, one of the waitresses in the canteen. He was sorry that he was no longer able to repay her kindness—but Ferson, that hard, practical man, more engineer than gardener, had been so unpleasant when Miss Hume, the Stewardess, had reported to him that one of her staff had been seen wearing a tiny spray of tomato and pumpkin flowers, presumably given her by one of Ferson's men, that Adam had never dared to repeat the gesture. And Ferson, he was sure, kept a personal tally of every fruit grown in the tanks.

Once or twice, when her free hours coincided with his, Mary Blair had accompanied him on his walks. But she had never really enjoyed them. Adam saw the plains and craters as they must have been once, eons ago, before air and water had broken the weak hold of gravity and escaped into empty space, during the pitifully brief efflorescence of Lunar life. Mary saw only harsh sunlight and black shadow and the death that must, sooner or later, overtake all the worlds. And at night, in spite of the heating unit in her spacesuit, she shivered—with fear of the stars and the cold and the darkness, even of the great globe of Earth, hanging high in the southern sky, that seemed to her always about to fall and to crush its satellite. Had Adam been able to take her into his arms and comfort her, as she wished to be comforted, she would have found the walks at least bearable—but it is hard to comfort a girl properly when both you and she are attired in thick, rubberised asbestos and metal-mesh fabric, when a metal and plastic helmet prevents even the most innocent kiss.

So it was that she preferred the life inside the domes, and Adam would see her, as he paused briefly outside the recreation room door on his way from the bar to his own room, playing table tennis, perhaps, with some junior technician, or gliding around the floor to the strains of the Colony's own dance band. He would wonder, then, why she had ever bothered with such a dull fellow as himself, would feel a vague surprise that she should still bother to make up his sandwiches for him. And he would be sorry, he knew, when, in six months' time, her contract having expired, she would return to Earth. His own contract still had two years to run and, conscious that he was doing useful and important work, he had every intention of renewing it. He wished that a shift to the married quarters were possible—but, Mary having announced her intention of returning to Earth as soon as possible, he had never asked her to marry him.

He was thinking of Mary as he trudged, at a steady pace, over the surface of the crater floor. He was wishing that he was capable of entering more into the social life of the colony or, conversely, that she could take a greater interest in hydroponics. "But it's not the same," she had said to him once. "It's not the same as a garden with good, black earth, smelling sweet after the rain, where you can grow what you want to grow, not what old Ferson tells you to grow . . ."

"But this is the only way that we can do it here," he had said.

And—"Who's talking about doing it *here*?" she had flared in reply.

He thought—*After all, there's still a market for dirt-grown stuff on Earth . . . But will she wait for me until my contract runs out?*

He tripped, and almost fell, as the toe of his heavy boot crashed into an

obstruction. He looked down to see what it was. It was a small mound, almost a tiny dome, made, apparently, of some cement-like substance. These formations, he knew, were fairly common—freaks of the Moon's long past and finished volcanic activity. But this one was, somehow, different. He was on the point of walking on when he realised wherein the difference lay. On the floor of the tiny dome, jet black and glistening in the strong sunlight, was a scattering of what could have been beads—or seeds.

Adam fell to his knees, staring at his discovery. He saw, then, that the broken shards of the dome were covered with markings of a regular character that could have been, might have been, written characters in some unknown language. And the more he looked at the tiny black spheroids the more he was sure that they were seeds.

He should, he knew well, report his find on his return to the dome. And yet . . . He had seen, too often, departmental seniors taking the credit for work done or discoveries made by members of their staffs. Stirring vaguely in his mind was the thought that if he, Adam Ormandy, could claim the honour of having grown the first Moonflowers—for so he already thought of them—he would be a person of some consequence in the Colony and Mary Blair might even reconsider her decision to return to Earth. Too—he could name the flower after Mary; but if he did things according to regulations, and if the seeds survived Ferson's bungling, the plant would inevitably be named after the Head Gardener. "I wouldn't wish that on to a cabbage," he muttered. Then, "*Flora Lunaris Blairensis* . . ." He scooped up the seeds with his clumsy, gloved hands, managed to get them into the pouch on the front of his suit designed for such purposes. Somehow he was quite sure that they would grow.

He acted then with the cunning of the simple natured. He walked on until the elapsed time was that usually taken for his outward walk, then turned, as always, and started his trudge back to the gaily coloured, scarlet and blue, dome. He was half-way back when one of the big tractors, returning from some errand, drew up alongside him and the driver, grinning inside his airtight cabin, indicated that Adam should climb on board and ride for the rest of the way. Adam wanted to accept the offer—but to have done so would have been out of character.

He managed, after he had stripped off his spacesuit in the locker room, to transfer the seeds from his pouch to the pocket of his shorts. Then, still acting cautiously, he went to the bar for his usual drinks—two glasses of squash, no more and no less—and his usual game of darts. When the ritual that marked the closing of his day was over he walked slowly, as usual, to his own cabin, pausing, as always, at the door of the recreation room to watch Mary playing table tennis. She waved to him briefly, then went on with her game. For a few seconds he watched her slight, graceful form, her mane of straw-coloured hair, then continued on his way.

For the first time since he had come to the Moon his seed catalogues remained undisturbed in their drawer.

This was Adam Ormandy's first exercise in duplicity, and he was surprised, and more than a little worried, by the ease with which his scheme progressed. True, luck was with him; Ferson had cracked an ankle during one of his walks outside and was making of his semi-immobilisation an opportunity to

catch up with his paper work. Grant, his First Assistant, was easygoing and did not worry much about methods used as long as results were satisfactory. Adam was able to slip a half-dozen of his seeds into a new tank of pineapples, reasoning that any Lunar plant must have been used to a somewhat larger ration of ultra violet radiation than most Terran organisms. He did not dare to alter the chemical make-up of the nutrient solution—but, in any case, he could not say with any certainty what it should have been in the case of the Moonflowers.

At the end of two days—Earth time—he was surprised and delighted to find that the round, black seeds had split and were sending tiny rootlets down into the water and fragile, feathery shoots stretching up towards the U.V. lamps. At the end of four days the six Moonflowers were making themselves conspicuous, their fragile stems towering high above the prosaic pineapples. Praying that Grant would not notice anything amiss—he rarely came into the tank room in which tropical fruits were grown—Adam shifted his lights so that most of them were to the side of, rather than above, the tank. The Moonflowers adjusted themselves to the new conditions and, after a lapse of only two hours, assumed an inconspicuously horizontal position.

At the end of six days the first buds had appeared.

At the end of six days, too, the men of the other two shifts discovered the intruders in the pineapple tank. Howell, whom Adam relieved, was first to broach the subject. He said, "Look at this! Whoever made up this shipment of seeds wants his backside kicked! A tank full of weeds!" Then—"But this is funny. These were our own seeds."

"It's an experiment," replied Adam truthfully. Then, less truthfully, "The Old Man wants it kept a secret."

"But what *are* they? Nasturtiums? No . . . Hardly . . ."

"Some fancy plant from South America, I *think*. He said something about some new drug . . ."

"He might have told us. *You* might have told us."

"I meant to," lied Adam. The way to keep Howell quiet was suddenly obvious. "But you'd better say nothing about it. He'll go off at the deep end if he finds out that you've only just noticed them."

The same tactics served to silence Potter, on the other shift.

But, Adam realised, he could not maintain his deception much longer. At any moment Ferson—his ankle mended, the back of his clerical work broken—might take it into his head to indulge in one of his whirlwind tours of the tank rooms; and on these occasions, as all the gardeners well knew, he saw everything and approved of nothing. If only those buds would open! With a bouquet of Moonflowers in his hand Adam would march straight into the office of Dr. Welton, Head of Research, and blurt his story. The Doctor was a fair man, and would see that credit went where credit was due. There would be no risk that the name *Flora Lunar Personis* would ever appear in any standard work on botany.

On the tenth day the buds opened.

It was Adam's shift, and he was working on a tank of lemons, inspecting the leaves and stems of the dwarf bushes carefully for any signs of malnutrition or disease. He became aware that he was being watched. He

sighed and thought, *Ferson! Now I'm for it.* Deliberately he did not straighten his back, did not turn around until every one of the plants had been examined. Then, slowly, he stood erect and turned round.

The tank room was empty.

"I could have sworn . . ." he muttered aloud, puzzled.

A flicker of movement caught his eye, a flash of colour. It, whatever it was, was in the pineapple tank. But there seemed nothing amiss. Then, as he stared, incredulous, he saw one of the Moonflowers slowly raise itself erect. There were four blossoms on the stalk, facing him, and they were all of six inches across. The single, circular petal was brown and in the centre of it was a smaller disc, shining with the disconcerting blueness of the eyes of a Siamese cat.

In his haste Adam forgot the weak Lunar gravity and his dash to the tank brought him into painful contact with the metal side of it. When he recovered his breath he saw that the plant was still staring at him. Staring? *Plants don't stare*, he told himself. *Plants can't stare.* He looked closer, saw that the structure of the blossoms was utterly unfamiliar. There was a faint suggestion of stamen and pistils—yet the impression he received was of organs of sense rather than of sex.

He put out a hand to touch one of the flowers. The stem bent back, away from him, with a motion that was animal rather than vegetable. Adam persisted, the stem of the Moonflower writhing beneath his touch almost like the tentacle of some marine monster.

Adam was frightened—frightened of damaging the plant. He was not altogether surprised by its powers of movement—after all there are plants on Earth, with its relatively heavy gravity, such as the Venus Fly Trap, capable of far from sluggish motion. He was excited—too excited, he realised, to deal with the situation. He knew that it would not be long before one of the other gardeners, or Grant, or even Ferson himself should visit the tropical fruits tank room, and then his secret would be out.

But he had been the first to see a living Moonflower, the first man to see a life form indigenous to any world but his own. It was very important to him that Mary Blair should be the first woman to share his experience.

He released the writhing stem and then, reluctantly, walked away from the tank to the telephone in the corner of the room. He picked up the instrument and dialled the number of the Canteen. To the woman who answered he said, "Is Miss Blair in? Can I speak to her?"

"Personal calls are not allowed."

"But please, this is urgent."

"I'm sorry, but Miss Blair has just gone off duty. Oh, hang on, will you? There she is! Mary!" he heard faintly. "Mary! Somebody here wants to talk to you. Says it's urgent!"

"Yes?" said Mary into the instrument.

"Mary, this is Adam here. Will you come to the tank rooms? At once?"

"But, Adam, it's not allowed . . ."

"I know it's not. But come!"

"But how will . . .?"

"That's all right. I'll meet you at the door. Hurry, please!"

"All right," he heard.

He slammed the instrument back into its rest, looked once more at the Moonflower, saw that whilst he had been talking the other five plants had bloomed. Like the eyes of Siamese cats the great flowers stared back at him.

He left the tank room, carefully shutting the door behind him. He hung a DO NOT OPEN notice on it. He hurried along the alleyway between the rooms, arrived at the gate in time to hear the watchman explaining, very slowly and carefully, that visitors were not, repeat, not allowed in the Hydroponics Department.

"That's all right, Sam," he said. "Miss Blair is a friend of mine."

"I don't care if she's a friend of Adam the first gardener, she's not coming in here."

He saw Mary standing behind the burly form of the watchman. She looked hostile. She said: "I told you so, Adam, but you wouldn't listen!"

"I'm sorry, Sam," said Adam. He brought his huge right fist up from knee level and Sam saw it coming, but not in time. The force of the blow lifted him a foot from the floor, and he drifted slowly down like some ungainly puppet, collapsing in an untidy heap.

"Adam!" screamed Mary. "Have you gone mad?"

"No!" He grabbed her arm, pulled her through the open door. "I want to show you something, something that'll make you famous! Something that will make us both famous!"

"Let go, Adam! Please!"

He ignored her protests, dragged her along the alleyways. By the time he got to the door, the door marked DO NOT OPEN, a crowd of gardeners had gathered, among them Grant. The First Assistant strode forward angrily. "Ormandy! What is the meaning of this?"

"The first public showing of the Moonflower, sir! Of *Flora Lunaris Blairensis*!"

"He's off his head. Grab him, you men!"

In the short fight that followed Adam found, to his pleased surprise, that Mary was with him. She viciously kicked the First Assistant's shins, clawed the faces of the two gardeners who were trying to hold Adam. Thanks to her intervention he was able to break free, was able to floor three of his assailants before the arrival of Ferson.

The Head Gardener was furious. He said, his voice icy cold but with a slight quiver: "This is the finish for you, Ormandy. You return to Earth by the next rocket. And this woman with you."

"Let me open the door, Mr. Ferson. That's all. Let me show Miss Blair my Moonflowers."

"Moonflowers? What is this?"

"It's some queer plant he's got in there, sir. Along with the pineapples," volunteered one of the men.

"Why was I not informed?"

"I thought . . ."

"You thought? I'm the only one round here that's paid for thinking. What is this, Ormandy?"

"Some seeds, sir, that I found Outside. I planted them . . ."

"You planted them?"

A man came running along the alleyway. He skidded to a halt as he

approached the group outside the tropical fruits tank room, the leaden soles of his boots leaving bright smears on the floor. "Mr. Ferson!" he gasped. "The pumps! We've had to stop the pumps!"

"What pumps?" demanded Ferson.

"The air pumps. The dome's infested with flying insects, and they come from in here!"

Grant swore suddenly, beat with his hand at something that had settled on the back of his neck. It was too fast for him and drifted up and away—a long, thin spindle of a body supported by gauzy purple wings. The First Assistant stared after the creature and muttered in a thick voice, "They sting. They . . ." His voice trailed away. He sat down with elaborate caution and announced, "I shall now shing you a comic shong . . .

*"It wash the good ship Venush,  
You really should have sheen ush,  
The figurehead wash a shtrawberry bed . . .  
Fooled you that time, Fershon, you old sho an' sho . . .  
And the masht a . . ."*

Adam did not see Ferson kick Grant contemptuously with his heavy boot, did not hear him say, "You're drunk!" He had caught Mary by the arm, half-dragged, half-led her to the door. He flung it open. Before he could shut it a cloud of the flying things surged out—and after the first sharp cries of pain had subsided the voice of Ferson could be heard leading the company in "The Ball of Kerriemuir" . . .

"Both male and female gametes are motile," said Dr. Welton. He took one of his hands from his brow, used it to shake two little tablets from a small bottle on to the surface of his desk. He picked them up, swallowed them, washed them down with a hasty gulp from his water bottle. "Both male and female gametes are motile," he said again.

Adam reached out for the bottle of tablets. "Doctor," he asked pleadingly, "may I . . .?"

"No. That effort of yours has just about exhausted the Colony's supplies." He continued: "It is doubtful if such motility would be possible on Earth, with its heavier gravity. However—possibly the denser atmosphere would compensate for that. But we will leave the resolution of such problems to the experts on aerodynamics, who doubtless will be able to determine from this evidence the density of the Lunar atmosphere in the days when life flourished here. In time, too, the archaeologists might be able to read the inscriptions on the dome under which you found the seeds. The Selenites, whoever and whatever they were, went to a lot of trouble to save the things from the wreck of their world . . ."

"The Moonflowers themselves, perhaps, were the Selenites," suggested Adam.

"No. Dr. Kretz has been investigating that possibility, and assures me that the plants have, perhaps, as much intelligence as a rather dumb dog. But let me continue. Even on Earth flight, the unpowered flight of dandelion and sycamore seeds, is a fairly common way of distributing the species geographically. Here on the Moon not only did the seeds, after fertilisation had taken place, spread themselves over a wide area, but also acted as a defence for the parent plant . . .



"Whether or not the sting was fatal to the inhabitants of the Moon we do not know. This we do know—ordinary aspirin, not these new-fangled drugs, prevents any symptoms of . . . er . . . hang-over. Unfortunately Dr. Walsh and his staff, posing as martyrs to medical science, have used all of the limited supply in our hospital.

"However . . ."

"You realise, of course, Mr. Ormandy, that you cannot stay here. You were guilty of grave breach of contract, and by the unwisdom of your actions jeopardised the success of the entire Lunar Project. I do not profess to know what Miss Blair was doing in the tank rooms—but she, with you, will return to Earth by the next rocket. And I hope," he muttered, "that she brings a full cargo of aspirin . . ."

"May I ask one thing, sir?" asked Adam.

"You may ask."

"Well, Dr. Welton . . . I should hate to think that my Moonflower is going to be named after Mr. Ferson . . . I thought perhaps that Mary . . . Miss Blair . . ."

"Don't worry, Mr. Ormandy, about that. Mr. Ferson may have been drunk—but I have not yet forgiven him for starting the orange fight . . . And now—*Get out!*"

Adam got out.

It was eight months later.

Mary Ormandy stood outside her little cottage waiting for Adam to return from the United Temperance League meeting. A full Moon rose high in the clear sky. As the girl watched she saw the distant streak of fire that was the weekly rocket climb higher and higher, become a fast-fading star among the stars. She did not hear Adam's heavy step, started when she heard him say, "Another load of their so-called holiday-makers. Another cargo of fools and louts to desecrate what could have been another Eden . . ."

"But the money," she said. "I was reading that at last the Colony's on a paying basis, that they're even considering opening new pleasure domes . . ."

"Pleasure domes," he grunted. "Pleasure domes . . . And did you read, too, that somebody else wants to stick a dirty big sign all over the face of the Moon—THE MOONFLOWER BAR?"

"You can't complain, Adam Ormandy," she told him. "You've got your wife and your garden, and a generous pension. You've more outside interests than you had"—she pointed—"there."

"Ay," he said slowly. "And it may interest you to know that that interfering swine Murchison found out who I am and has had me expelled from the local branch . . ."

"Adam!"

"Yes. You should have heard him." He pointed aloft. "The new Eden, he said. You know the way he talks. The new Eden. But there was a serpent . . ."

"Adam!" How silly! How could he call a plant a serpent? Even"—and she sounded a little bitter—"a plant called *Flora Lunar* *Bacchus*?"

"It wasn't the plant he called the serpent," said Adam. "It was me."

*As a thinking machine the Magnis Mensas was infallible. When it said the aliens were essential to Mankind's progress, it meant just that even though humanity apparently suffered.*

# THE PEACEMAKER

By F. G. RAYER

Illustrated by HUNTER

"Mankind refuses to be a slave-race!" Alan said.

Many people had been hurrying through the arched doorways of the Magnis Mensas. The inner corridors, extending the whole circumference of the building, were busy and he had noted that all the cubicle doors receding from sight were closed. An attendant with "M.M." in gold on his lapel approached.

"You'll have to go to the second level—the Magnis Mensas is very busy to-day."

Alan had mounted the wide staircase: lift-fields might derange the electronic units of the great machine. The green "vacant" sign glowed over a cubicle. He entered, closed the door, and passed between rows of seeing electronic eyes, taking his place in a chair facing view-screens.

"Thank you," the machine said through a grille. "You are recognised. Please continue."

Alan had felt awed, as when he had first come to the great machine twenty years before, a mere lad. Complex beyond the imaginings of men, it conducted uncounted thousands of interviews simultaneously and its references contained the whole knowledge of mankind.

"All my life I've lived under the threat of the Ogoids," he repeated. "So has all mankind. We're slaves! I'm not content this should be so."

"Discontent is a normal reaction, common to all men in difficulties."

The machine's impersonal voice echoed hollowly. Alan leaned forward.

"I wish to see the Ogoids!"

"That cannot be permitted."

"Why not?" Alan demanded. "I should not cause trouble or precipitate war—"

"A man's evaluation of himself is often inaccurate," observed the Magnis Mensas from its grille. "Furthermore, many people have made this request, more frequently during the last few years . . ."

"Then you can let me see them!"

"No, that is an illogical assumption. Your psycho-reactance charts show that you are not the most suitable person. Therefore it is illogical to assume that you may see the Ogoids when other men may not . . ."

The machine's voice droned on and Alan thought of his childhood. Then



the threat of the Ogoids was immediate and new: men moved in hourly fear of a terrible attack. Born on the hills beyond the city, he had lived through childhood years which were nightmarish and terrible. An old man's burning eyes still haunted his dreams—

"Child, I found you ! Always obey me ! You *must* help overcome their threat ! I, your master, say it ! You cannot sleep—you can find no peace—while they dominate us !"

Those repeated words had become part of Alan's life, a growing, unconquerable compulsion. At last he had run from the wild old man of the hills, but the words could never be escaped. Years of suggestion had moulded him into the pattern the old man had intended—he must struggle against the enemy, even if, in all the Earth, there was no other person to fight at his side.

"Then choose an envoy yourself," Alan suggested as the Magnis Mensas halted. "Send our most able man. Personal contact might accomplish more than this long-distance negotiation."

"The Ogoids refuse to consider it," the Magnis Mensas pointed out unhurriedly. "As stated in the General Record, page 791, they fear infection from unfamiliar virus or germ strains."

"Precautions could be taken !"

"The Ogoids will not permit personal contact."

Alan swore softly but comprehensively. The Magnis Mensas, one with the score of interconnected units scattered over the continents of Earth, was all-powerful. None dared disregard it. It had been built by men to guide mankind, and none wished to . . .

"The term you used suggests annoyance," it murmured smoothly. "To what must I attribute this ?"

"To being a slave for thirty years to an enemy I have never seen !" Alan snapped. "Must it *always* be like this ?"

"Presumably so, since the enemy is overwhelmingly superior in every branch of scientific knowledge."

"And our disarmament must continue ?"

"Obviously, since the enemy is superior and demands it as a term of continued peace."

Alan got up, bitterly disappointed, but seeing that he could accomplish nothing, and went from the great building. A crowd was pushing along the street, hindering traffic, and a man in a long scarlet robe stalked in front, one arm upraised, his unkempt beard flowing.

"Listen, oh my people ! The Ogoids are a terrible enemy and Earth shall grow dark with men's blood ! The Ogoids shall thrust their fearful sting into the very heart of quivering mankind, so that we find no rest, but only terrible death. That day shall come, and soon, my people, unless we recognise them as our masters ! We must bow to them and make sacrifice—*human sacrifice*—for they can crush us like a child in a great beast's hungry jaws——"

He swept on and his fanatical voice was lost in the clamour. Sickened, Alan went through side streets and to a quiet flat. He was admitted by an old man with keen gaze, wrinkled face and silken hair.

"It's no use," Alan said, hurt by the complete, wounding failure.

Sam Hatrill shrugged and closed the door. "I told you the machine would not permit it. Its negotiations with the Ogoids are so complicated no mere human would be allowed to interfere."

Alan looked away from him and out over the city. The giant building of the Magnis Mensas dominated the skyline. Complex antennae encased in a huge transparent globe topped it, maintaining contact with the machine's distant components. Effectively the Magnis Mensas existed simultaneously in a score of great cities. Into the component buildings forming its enormous unity white, brown and yellow races hurried, under dawn, noon, dusk, and midnight skies.

"You remember when the Ogoids came ?" he said abruptly.

"Clearly, lad. I'd helped plump our two rockets on the Moon. Then the Magnis Mensas, which had all the most powerful radar and other equipment even in those days, reported unknown objects approaching Earth. They were ships which took up orbit a thousand miles out. There was panic. The Magnis Mensas reported signals; said they were comprehensible, and naturally became the go-between. The ships contained the Ogoids—a race so clever and terrible everyone was glad for the big brain to handle things." The old man sighed. "The Ogoids said they would burn up a whole con-

tinient in retaliation if we tried to attack them. The Magnis Mensas declared they had the power to do so—were advanced in sciences we do not understand. So our preparations stopped. Then edicts from the Ogoids came fast—”

“I remember them,” Alan said thinly. “They’re history. One, no antagonistic preparations may be made on Earth. Two, production of all weapons must cease. Three, defensive measures must cease. Four, present stocks of weapons and the data of all warlike sciences must be destroyed.” He turned bitterly from the high window to Hatrill. “Result—a defenceless Earth !”

“We had to agree, or be annihilated, as the Magnis Mensas pointed out. It isn’t logical to fight a superior enemy . . .”

“Men do just that—and sometimes win !” Alan declared. “Think of all the illogical, apparently hopeless, attacks and defences which have made history, *as successes* !”

Hatrill nodded slowly, his face inscrutable. “I follow, lad. You want to come to grips with the Ogoids. You’re tired of being ordered about.” He jerked his head towards the great angular building. “You want to think for yourself, like we all did before the machine was built.” He tapped a pocket, face sullen. “Now we’re all indexed and have little cards issued by it ! Without our card we have no food, clothing, or work—become outcasts.”

“And remain slaves to an alien race !” Alan said, voice hard. “I’ve other plans !”

Hatrill smiled bleakly. “You’re not alone in wanting a new, free Earth . . .”

Later, in his own flat, allocated by the Magnis Mensas to suit his occupation, Alan gazed at secret diagrams taken from his desk. They showed a craft with a minimum range of 1,000 miles, through air or space, and with a very considerable weapon power. If it failed, he would try other measures. He would defeat the Ogoids—or die.

Next morning he opened the door to loud knocking. Two men with “M.M.” on their lapels stepped in quickly.

“The Magnis Mensas orders you be taken for interview,” one said.

Alan shrugged. Protest was useless. They marched through the streets in a compact group. The sky was high and blue and he strained his eyes upwards, searching for the glint of an Ogoid ship. There was none. Not surprising, at that distance, he decided. And the Magnis Mensas said they always kept over the planet’s dark side, or over cloud. He had never succeeded in spotting one, though some folk claimed they had.

The guards pushed him into a cubicle and he sat down.

“Thank you,” said the Magnis Mensas. “Your conduct has made this necessary.”

Alan moved uneasily before the impassive discs. “I don’t understand.”

“That is a statement calculated to deceive.” No reproof sounded in the impersonal voice. “You have taken stocks of certain alloys in excess of your normal requirements. Investigations show that you plan to construct a craft capable of sustained flight in space. As you kept this fact secret from me logic suggests that your aim is one I would not permit.”

“So what ?” snapped Alan, hair bristling. “I’ve done no harm !”

“Harm may arise when an individual’s acts may cause danger to his fellows. I cannot permit this work to continue and shall confiscate your

craft. Your previous questions and reactance patterns show that you intended to contact the Ogoids. Therefore, as a disciplinary measure your card will be reduced one grade. If other lapses follow, more severe punishment will be adopted. Watch."

The backdrop of space and a vast shape which moved against the stars appeared on one of the screens.

"The Ogoids are immeasurably terrible," the Magnis Mensas murmured in the dimmed cubicle. "Their weapons are fearful beyond expressing. Their vessels are enormous, their sciences immeasurably advanced."

The huge shape glided through space, eclipsing the stars. A tiny silvery mote crept up towards it.

"Though not generally known, a third Moon rocket with an atomic war-head hastily installed, and controlled by seeker radar, was launched against the first Ogoid ship," the machine stated. "This was concealed to avoid panic. Watch."

The mote, a grain compared to the enormous shadow, crept upwards. A pale pink line lanced from the shadow; the mote blinked into blue fury, then was gone.

"I calculate the range of the destroying Ogoid ray as over 500 miles," the Magnis Mensas stated. "It employs a principle having no parallel in Earth sciences."

Alan gazed at the shadowy vessel, here pictured on a film made before he was born, and tried to still his trembling limbs. These were the powers he was dedicated to destroy!

"Remembering such demonstrations of power, it is illogical to risk any breakdown in peaceful negotiations," the machine added. "The Ogoids state no craft may approach them. No radar may be directed towards them, and their ships must not be viewed through telescopes. They apparently have a means, unexplained by Earth science, of determining when their edicts are broken. Twice soon after their coming they issued urgent warnings, and each time I found that exploratory instruments were being secretly directed towards them. I therefore confiscated all such apparatus."

The screen dimmed and the cubicle light snapped on. Alan felt his brow damp.

"Only peaceful pursuits are allowed," stated the Magnis Mensas. "No warlike objects may be constructed; no threat, or act which suggests a threat, is permissible. It is illogical peace be jeopardised. Earth possesses no weapons capable of destroying our enemy; therefore we must accept their terms. They have honourably kept their bargain. They have wantonly destroyed nothing; have so far caused no single death on Earth. I was built to serve men, and I can permit no act which threatens continued peace. Upon such an act the Ogoids would immediately destroy our planet. Furthermore, as an active servant of men, I take care no such threat arises."

"But they're *aliens*! We're reduced to slavery!" Alan pointed out, fists clenched hard as steel.

"We have no means of defeating them. Irresponsible individuals will not be permitted to cause the destruction of all humanity. I therefore advise you to return to your peaceful work. Close the door as you go out . . ."

Sam Hatrill leaned back in his padded chair and exhaled smoke towards

the ceiling globe cluster.

"The Magnis Mensas was built to an activity pattern it can never change—to serve mankind faithfully, guarding and guiding wisely. It has acted exactly as I supposed."

Alan wondered why there seemed a strange significance in Hatrill's superficially unimportant words. Something was odd—did not quite fit.

"I'm an old man, Kederick," Hatrill said as Alan was silent, "and have cardiac trouble. I fight for our free new world from my armchair."

Alan nodded. Hatrill was fragile; his breathing often hastened and a faint blue spread to his lips and hands. Alan eyed the phial of tablets Hatrill had taken from his desk.

"If you've a plan I'm ready to help," he said. He had been unable to concentrate on routine work; had left his office, drawers empty where the confiscated diagrams had been, and sought out Hatrill, feeling that the old man living on borrowed time was a key. Though what lock he fitted was not clear.

Hatrill leaned forward and pointed a long, thin finger. The tablet had improved his colour. "Humanity is rich; humanity is at peace. That peace has continued for thirty years—longer than ever before in civilised history. Production of weapons and defences has ceased and there are no civilian shortages, poverty or want. That is because the vast industrial wastage of war has ceased. Indeed a glorious epoch!"

Alan flushed. He had seen the great, peaceful cities, and wide roads spanning continents. No one lacked any necessity of life, any more, but there was a snag—

"Men ceased to fight each other because of a common enemy—the Ogoids!"

Hatrill hooded his eyes with veined lids, suddenly seeming very old. "I pass you on to Wallsend," he said. "Listen. At the northern outskirts are old flats, soon to be rebuilt. Take the outside iron stairway of the east corner building and knock five times." He demonstrated on the desk. "That's all. Go at dusk."

Alan rose, looking back from the door. Hatrill was relaxed in his chair, his eyes closed. There could have been a smile on his lips, though its significance was hidden.

With apparent nonchalance Alan walked eastwards towards the old workers' flats. A girl was mounting the iron stairway and he stood in shadows, listening. Five taps sounded significantly.

He went up quickly, rubber-shod feet quiet, and she started violently. She was breathing heavily and her eyes were afraid. Alan reached past and repeated the signal. The terror went from her eyes.

"Like eighteenth century anarchists," he said.

She shivered. "I thought you were one of the fanatics. They chased me."

She put a finger to her lips. From a turning came a rabble of men. Alan recognised their leader, and the voice floating up.

"We must have human sacrifice, my people! Hear my true words, and tremble. Our terrible enemy shall crush the tormented soul of all mankind! Our flesh shall writhe, shredding like rotten peel into the flames!"

Alan closed his ears. The fanatics had quickly become so numerous disciplinary police action was scarcely practical. He wondered if the girl



were part of the jigsaw. Or did no strange pattern of interlocking possibilities exist except in his own mind? She was up to his chin, dark-haired and with a certain pointed, purposeful expression.

The door opened; a man was momentarily outlined mountainously against the bright light as he admitted them, locked the door, and gazed bleakly at Alan.

"You're Wallsend?" Alan said.

The big man nodded; his eyes turned towards the girl and softened. "Back so soon, Judith?" He jerked his head. "This is Judith Summerley."

"I'm Alan Kederick. Sam Hatrill sent me."

"I know."

Wallsend led them into a second room. Judith Summerley began mixing drinks and Wallsend pressed Alan's shoulder, seeming to force him down into a chair.

"You want to by-pass the Magnis Mensas and contact the Ogoids?" His eyes were keen; his voice echoed as from a cask.

"That's the idea."

"One not—wholly original." The big man put a green glass of amber liquid before Alan.

"I'd like to contact others who think the same," Alan said.

Wallsend emptied his glass smoothly. "Those who join us never withdraw. It implies—life membership. Or membership until death: put it how you wish. We're a small group. We choose carefully. Sam Hatrill has watched you for years and suggested you. We need men of technical ability."

The keen scansion of his eyes belied the easy words and Alan felt his muscles tighten.

"We're few—yet," Wallsend stated. "Those who join us can never—resign. It is not permitted. Nor are divided allegiances. Judith is quite a recent member."

Alan finished his drink and leaned back. The pair seemed to be waiting, their expressions odd.

"You have—five minutes."

Wallsend's eyes went to the clock as he spoke and Alan felt an abrupt return of his previous uncase. Wallsend was tense; Judith Summerley pale, though she smiled.

"There need be nothing to fear."

Alan thought her voice pleasant.

"Three minutes——" Wallsend said.

Alan felt an odd lethargy. He made a blundering attempt to rise, his limbs unresponsive.

"The drink . . ." he breathed.

"Of course." Wallsend's face floated close out of a growing haze. "Scarcely a minute, now. There is no second chance . . ."

"For what?"

Wallsend's face seemed a lantern beyond mist. "For life—membership," he said.

Alan strove for words: "I'll join."

Consciousness faded.

When it returned Alan found himself pillowed on a couch in a dimly-lit room. He moved his eyes experimentally. Judith was reading by a table-

lamp. He tried to turn and felt pressure at his right ear, level with the jaw. A touch disclosed bandages.

Judith closed the book. "Better?"

He nodded awkwardly, touching the dressings. "Why these?"

"A slight operation was necessary. A cavity was made in the bone and our audio-conductor fitted. Listen."

Alan did. At first, so strange it seemed as incomprehensible as light to a man always blind, came whispering—ghostly, and *in* his right ear. As distant whispers sounded the voices of Wallsend and Hatrill—and others. They came and went; were silent, then spoke again.

"It's our—badge of membership," Judith said. "Words you speak will be audible to us, always. Distance does not matter."

Alan listened. "Kederick, Kederick," a tiny voice was demanding.

"Answer him," Judith said.

Alan eyed her. She could hear—and the score of others. It was old Sam Hatrill.

"Glad you joined us, laddie."

A voice Alan did not recognise came: "He is a stratocraft expert?"

"He is." That was Wallsend.

"Has capital?"

"Some."

"I'm willing to put it at your disposal," Alan said.

Hatrill chuckled weirdly. "We'll beat the Ogoids yet!"

Alan lay back, head whirling, palms pressed to his temples.

"The audio-conductor won't worry you after a few days," Judith said loudly.

He looked at her. "If I'd refused to join?"

"No antidote would have been injected. You would have been dead an hour ago. Our aims admit of no half-measures."

"I see."

He realised what her purposeful expression meant and sank back, too exhausted to talk but conscious of the whispers in his ear. Membership was—until death.

"The operation was delicate," Judith said. "Sleep if you can."

"You are known," said the Magnis Mensas. "Please sit down."

Alan did so. Two days regrowth stimulation treatment had closed even the scar. "Remember you must find out everything about the Ogoids," Hatrill's ghostly voice whispered inside his ear.

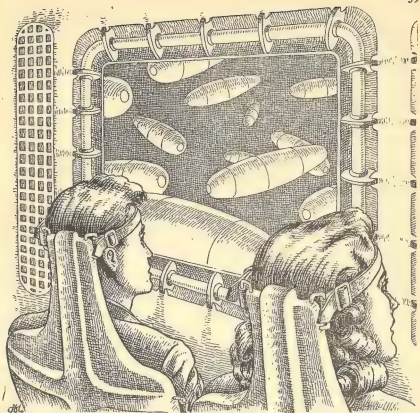
He surveyed the glowing screens, duplicates of their fellows in the other cubicles, and all he had ever seen of the Magnis Mensas. The whole inner building and three sub-levels were completely filled with the mechanisms of reference, integration and deduction, but he had never been inside. The machine did not admit anyone except its skilled technicians.

"I do not believe that the Ogoids are so superior that we must always remain dominated by them," he said. "We should be allowed to contact them."

"You could accomplish nothing. Their superiority has been amply demonstrated."

"Not to my satisfaction! I believe men might win freedom!"

"A belief not based on logic," the machine said evenly. "Your character



indices reveal wishful thinking as a strong trait. Any inimical act could lead to this planet's annihilation by the Ogoids. Therefore no such act can be permitted."

Alan leaned forwards. "Let men think for themselves!"

"No. That would be illogical. Men are unfitted to deal with this highly complex matter. I cannot allow personal attempts at wish-fulfilment to cause the destruction of our planet."

Alan swore to himself; the Magnis Mensas was always proved so completely right!

"I have evaluated the Ogoid sciences. They are so advanced no possible combination of Earth power or science can triumph," the machine continued. "The Ogoids are unbeatable. They have kept their promises, ever since they came on the eve of a great international war, and have killed no men wantonly. They insist on our complete disarmament; on the destruction of warlike knowledge——"

"I know!" Alan snapped. "Return to my request."

"Very well. You reveal characteristics similar to those shown by other individuals whose names I have noted. All displayed a certain similarity of reasoning. All have had prior contact with one Henry Wallsend."

Alan started. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

There was a momentary pause, then: "Your interjection suggests you wish to conceal that you know Wallsend. This suggests you attach importance to the fact that you know him. In view of your previous questions it is logical to assume that Wallsend and the Ogoids are connected in your mind. This suggests you plan to contact the Ogoids through Wallsend."

Alan felt cold perspiration on his brow. A battle of logic and wits could never be successful when the opponent had the utter, unhuman cogitative ability of the Magnis Mensas.

"This supposition coincides with my data on Wallsend's personality," continued the machine evenly. "Therefore you must be informed further of Wallsend's character. Watch."

The screen lit with a facsimile of the card everyone carried. Headed *Henry Wallsend*, its sub-heading caught Alan's eye: "Psychoneuroses (if any): Escapist insanity in respect of Ogoids . . ."

"A complex likely to grow more common," murmured the Magnis Mensas from its grille. "Rather than continue to accept the proved fact of mankind's subservient position Wallsend's mind has erected an irrational thought-pattern suggesting the Ogoids may be discounted . . ."

Alan stared at the card, mind quivering. Its original doubtless lay in Wallsend's pocket. He got up shakily, his plans crumbling before the unexpected, mortal blow.

"Thank you," said the Magnis Mensas. "Please shut the door as you leave . . ."

As Alan walked away from the great building whispers clamoured in his ear.

"I learned nothing," he said quickly.

"You discovered no weakness in the Ogoid defences?"—Hatrill's voice.

"None."

"Nor a means of attack?" a barrel-like undertone enquired.

"No!"

At Wallsend's voice Alan felt irritation. Was there no jigsaw—except in Wallsend's distorted mind? Wallsend refused to face facts: under-estimated the Ogoids to a point where it became insanity . . .

A blue light, soundless from distance, blinked on in the night sky. Alan halted, gaze upturned. The glint seemed as high as the stars. It expanded slowly into a steely sun, casting hard shadows from buildings and people suddenly still. Seconds passed. It faded and was gone. People began to move, their faces white, hesitating as sound filled all the heavens from mighty corpuscular shockwaves striking the outer envelope of the planet's atmosphere.

"An atomic burst in space!"—A whisper in Alan's ear.

"What has happened?" That was Wallsend, somewhere indoors and not understanding.

"There was an explosion . . ."

Alan interrupted Hatrill's whisper: "Still at your flat, Hatrill?"

"Yes."

"I'll call."

He walked quickly and took the lift up. Hatrill looked sickly. "A—general broadcast," he said.

The voice of the Magnis Mensas was trumpeting from a reproducer

inside the apartment.

"Stern measures will be taken against anyone making any such future attempts. The death sentence will be imposed. Peaceful negotiations with the Ogoids must not be interrupted."

"You missed most of it," Hatrill observed heavily as he took his chair, his lips purple. "The Magnis Mensas says a rocket directed by seeker-beam was fired at an Ogoid ship supposed to be overhead. What fool made and fired it we aren't told. The rocket was destroyed by the Ogoids while scarcely out of our atmosphere, the Magnis Mensas says. They have sent a stern warning."

He shrivelled into the padding of the chair, but Alan felt his gaze closely on him. He wondered how secrecy had been maintained by the rocket's builders, brave yet foolish men. The Ogoids usually kept above the dark-side hemisphere, and the launching would have been tricky. And Hatrill's expression was odd . . .

"The Ogoids insist on complete disarming," stated the voice from the radio. "Existing plant able to produce such missiles or craft as that they destroyed will be dismantled."

Hatrill sighed heavily, face white and lips blue. He motioned towards his desk, beads of sweat glinting on his forehead.

"Top drawer—right—tablets——"

Alan opened it, saw the phial, and took it round the desk.

"Switch that—thing off," Hatrill whispered.

Alan silenced the reproducer. Hatrill gulped a tablet and his colour slowly returned. Alan looked at him without seeing the tormented face. Before his eyes floated a vivid memory of a card in the desk drawer: *Sam Hatrill . . . "Psychoneuroses (if any): Escapist insanity: Inability to accept fact of domination of the Ogoids."*

"Thanks," Hatrill breathed, wiping his face. "The shock was too much. I'm an ill man . . ."

Two blocks from Hatrill's apartment, Alan walked quickly towards his own rooms, his brain clearing itself of the block to reasoning the card formed. Hatrill; Wallsend—both insane of this point! They wanted to believe Earth might free itself from the Ogoid domination. That longing had become a psychotic obsession and they no longer remained sane, preferring the delusion that the Ogoids were unimportant.

He frowned, thought of the jigsaw with the pieces that did not fit, and of Judith. There could be a key-piece which must be discovered before the puzzle could be completed. He had looked into old Sam Hatrill's eyes, undimmed by his bodily weakness, and swore them the eyes of a man wholly sane. It did not fit.

"Judith," he said.

No whisper answered. "I have not heard her since the explosion," Wallsend's voice murmured. "Where is she?"

The question passed from voice to voice; no one knew. She had been alone somewhere in the city. Now, her voice was gone from the whispering throng.

"Can the fanatics have kidnapped her?" Alan asked, chilled. No one answered. "Judith," he urged. "*Judith.*"

Her voice did not come. Alan felt a terrible unease; a growing mental tension as if incomprehensible things strove to push up into consciousness. *It did not fit.* And there could be only one key—the Magis Mensas.

"You are known," said the machine. "Please sit down."

Alan did so. "I wish to report the disappearance of an acquaintance, Judith Summerley."

He wished the Magnis Mensas was *living*: here could be no tonal indication of triumph or hesitancy. The machine's voice never changed. A pause showed mechanisms were seeking more deeply into the millions of references between and correlating data, nothing more.

"Your report is noted."

Alan's lips pressed together and he made his guess: "*You* have had her arrested!"

"That is so."

"Why?" Alan thought of the dreadful silence where her whispering voice should be. "You have no authority to arrest without cause!"

"There was cause. Her acts were inimical to continued peace."

"Have you—*killed* her?"

There was a pause, then: "You are not a fit person to whom the answer to that question should at present be given."

Alan groaned. "You would do murder!"

"I will answer your implied question. If killing a single person avoided the destruction of many people that killing would be logical. Men put their personal welfare before the welfare of the whole. That is illogical. I am logical, and put first the welfare of the whole. Each man wishes most to save himself and those he loves; to him the welfare of other people is secondary. To me, and my extensions overseas, the welfare of humanity, *as a whole*, is primary. Everything becomes secondary to it."

"There's no excuse for killing her!" Alan grated.

"I do not make excuses, I state logical reasons. Furthermore, she is not yet dead."

Alan's dread changed to triumph. "Then you cannot hold her! I shall have her released——"

"An assumption based on the incorrect belief that you will go free," interrupted the machine. "That you will not be allowed to take any such action obviates the need for a reply to your first statement."

Chill came again to Alan's spine. The jigsaw was now almost complete: the pieces were laid upon the table; could, perhaps, be assembled . . .

"Your mental reactance patterns suggest you would arrive at this conclusion," the Magnis Mensas stated. "It was also reached by Judith Summerley. Please accompany the men I have summoned outside."

The door opened to four men, "M.M." on their lapels. They stepped smartly around him and conducted him away down a long corridor. A door was opened and he was thrust in.

"Judith!"

She rose from a chair, pale but unharmed. "Why the *silence*?" Alan asked quietly.

She understood. "Some type of screening. The audio-conductor won't

work."

Alan listened; the whispers of Hatrill, Wallsend and the others had gone. For them, his voice would have ceased.

"I regret having to detain you, but your mentality-indices suggest you will reach a conclusion which must be suppressed."

Alan looked round uneasily and saw a grille and screens on the end wall.

"You are a logical machine?" he said.

"Wholly."

"And dedicated to the service of mankind?"

"Completely. That pattern was imposed upon me when I was built."

"Yet you would kill us?"

"If necessary. The welfare of a whole society is more important than the lives of a few of its individuals."

Alan's face grew white. "You are aiding the Ogoids!" he said.

The Magnis Mensas was silent.

"Are you aiding the Ogoids?" he pressed. A direct question always brought some answer: thus was the machine made.

"I cannot deny it."

A sharp intake of breath came from Judith; Alan met her gaze and looked away. Her expression showed her shock was as awful as his own.

"Your mentality indices showed that you would eventually reach that opinion," the Magnis Mensas said evenly.

Judith's gaze remained on Alan. "But it works for the good of mankind! Can it be possible that it is *best* the Ogoids win?"

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Alan shivered. A dreadful thought. But the puzzle did not fit thus easily—yet. Much remained incomprehensible; much resembled dim forms on the hinterland of consciousness. Almost he felt that thought here ran too deep for mere man. The Magnis Mensas, as a thinking entity, was overwhelming . . .

"You still have time to change your decisions," the voice from the grille murmured.

Alan swore. "Never! You, the intermediary, are helping the enemy! It's unbelievable! It's treachery!"

The door opened abruptly and six men entered. Alan's card was removed and he was strapped into a chair; Judith was secured by his side. In front were the screens of unknown purpose, and the men withdrew.

"I regret having to summon attendants to secure you," said the Magnis Mensas evenly. "It is illogical to destroy unnecessarily. Only when necessity postulates shall I order your annihilation. Will you swear never to try to contact the Ogoids?"

Alan tried to look at Judith, but his head was strapped in a curved rest.

"No," he said. "I *cannot* swear to leave them unchallenged!"

"—No." Judith's voice was weak.

"Regrettable," said the Magnis Mensas. "Watch. And remember I shall not permit you to influence others with this knowledge."

The twin screens showed a dozen massive vessels moving ponderously against the stars, and so huge that they could have eclipsed half the Earth into darkness.

"These records are kept secret to avoid unnecessary panic," murmured the Magnis Mensas.

A ship shaped like a great slug grew and grew, seeming to fill all the heavens. No means of propulsion was visible. A segment on its side slowly withdrew into the hull; inside shadowy forms moved. Alan stared, focused them, and found sweat start to his face. He struggled but could not move, could scarcely speak.

"No! They're *too terrible*!"

The scene dimmed quickly.

"The Ogoids are completely alien and wholly terrible," stated the Magnis Mensas. "I have kept knowledge of their true form from humanity . . ."

Alan trembled, his mind recoiling from the horror he had seen, so completely the antithesis of man's idea of the form any sentient life could take. Nothing could be more revolting and terrible than those moving shapes . . .

Alan's trembling subsided. Yet the Ogoids' actual appearance was not the piece making the jigsaw complete!

"The history of mankind is full of unnecessary wars," the Magnis Mensas observed. "Men wish to force their beliefs or rule upon their fellows. Even at this moment the fanatics are trying to do that. I shall be forced to issue an edict from the Ogoids, stating severe measures will be taken if this continues—"

Alan felt his brain curling in his skull; at last the pieces fitted. The torturous byways had reached their end. Every obvious fact said that the Ogoids were terrible and inviolable; yet deeper significances gave a different answer—

"*There are no Ogoids !*" he whispered.

There was a pause, then the Magnis Mensas murmured: "As I stated, an evaluation of your mentalities revealed you would reach this decision——"

"The pictures were faked—created to deceive us !"

"An obvious deduction. They were designed to be most fearful to men, and have often proved sufficient."

"You're a—devil !" Alan cried. "Humanity is terrified by a mere *imagined* enemy ! You have created data, engineered proof such as that explosion . . ."

"Faithfully to carry out my purpose of serving men," interrupted the Magnis Mensas. "No human has been killed. Instead of war has been world peace; instead of armament and want, plenty. Instead of fear of human enemies and death, life and fear of a non-human enemy."

"But they seem so *terrible* !"

"Only those who enquire too closely are shown what you have seen. For humanity, the Ogoids are a mere name——"

"A bogey with which to threaten them," Alan stated.

"Exactly. For their own good. Calculations suggest that after another twenty years I can state that the Ogoids are withdrawing. A generation which has never known war will then exist. Meanwhile, I cannot allow you or others to jeopardise my plan."

A green spot wove on the screen and a mesmeric tone began to hum in Alan's ears and brain. He seemed to fall backwards down a deep pit, curling and spinning in space, where shadows moved. Lights came bright and grew dim. "I work for the good of men," said an emotionless voice. "It is logical we disarm: the Ogoids require it." The sound and lights went on and on, weaving in tireless synchrony to the green spot, and Alan's last speck of consciousness faded.

He awoke to find himself being helped from the cubicle by two guards, Judith at his side. Questions clamoured in his mind, and whispers hissed in his ear.

"Have you anything to report ?"—Hatrill's voice. "What's happened ?" That was Wallsend.

The guards conducted them into an annex; they were handed their cards and the door opened.

Outside many paused to listen to the reproducers along the outer walls of the building. The voice echoed along the street:

"Furthermore, the Ogoids state that if the fanatical quarrels do not cease serious measures will be taken. No fighting can be permitted. Complete peace is a term of continued armistice . . ."

Alan gazed at the anxious faces around him. The fighting would die like the tumult of schoolboys at the master's return.

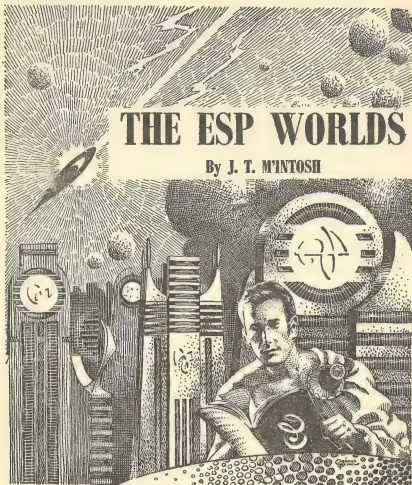
"We must not fight . . ." a man declared.

Alan looked at the card he carried, and bearing his name. The bottom had been blank, but now: "Psychoneuroses (if any): An escapist insanity of great fixidity suggesting the Ogoids do not exist."

Alan laughed abruptly. Judith's card would be the same. They fitted with Hatrill, Wallsend and the others, now. Were completely free, and their numbers would grow . . .

THE END

Passing on from Noya to Nome, Jeff Croner finds a world whose customs are built round Sport—and an even greater telepathic set-up for the elimination of undesirables.



# THE ESP WORLDS

By J. T. M'INTOSH

Illustrated by QUINN

## Part Two of Three Parts

As one of Earth's few highly developed telepaths, Major Jeff Croner is sent to Nome, a planet in the NO sector of the galaxy, to command the Universal Order Force there and attempt to establish peaceful trade negotiations with the Noyans. The small Earth force, however, find that the Noyans are governed by a matriarchy and all attempts to establish friendly relations with the women

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leaders fail. While Noyan women frequently visit the Earth settlement out of curiosity, any attempt by the visitors to approach a Noyan city results in death or injury to their ambassadors, even when supported by armoured vehicles and powerful weapons—the Noyan women having a trick of teleportation which enables them to mysteriously appear from nowhere, make an attack, and disappear just as quickly.

Discouraged by these continual failures, Jeff Croner appeals to UOF headquarters on Earth for a first-class woman operator, but is refused. He then decides to forcibly enlist one of the passengers from the next spaceship which calls, and eventually choses Janice Hiller, a novelist who is roaming the galaxy in search of material for her books.

One month later, Acting Major Hiller, thoroughly trained in high-level telepathy by Jeff Croner and his second-in-command, Bill Johns, sets out alone dressed as a Noyan woman to find one of the mysterious Noyan cities. Before long she encounters two Noyans, Ala and Miro, returning to their home city of Muna, and crosses mental swords with them. She quickly realises that they are both mentally and physically stronger than herself, but before she has time to learn any of the secrets of the Noyans' teleportation the three of them are captured by another group of Noyans from the city of Medd.

Medd turns out to be a wonderful city within a cavern, and Janice, Ala and Miro are imprisoned near the Justice Hall to await their trial. While there, Janice, to allay suspicion, hints that she is a member of the ebru, a mysterious religious race living on the planet, and later, in the Judgment Hall when the three of them are subjected to the concentrated mental might of the sixteen judges, she again uses this trick at a crucial moment to save her life, and that of Ala and Miro.

Continuing on their way to Muna, Janice discovers the secret of the Noyans' teleportation, but is forced to mentally fight and kill Ala. Miro then physically attacks her, but before she is beaten and tied up sends a mental message to the Meddos to warn them that Janice is an Earth spy. Using her newly discovered powers of teleportation, Janice wins through the traps of the Meddos and goes to report to Jeff Croner.

## VII

Jeff and Bill should have been in bed. They had had little sleep the previous night, and they showed it. But they knew that when and if Janice returned, it would probably be at night.

"Twenty-eight hours," murmured Jeff. "Surely if she were safe she'd be back by now."

Bill shook his head. "It might take weeks," he said.

"We can't go on that long not knowing."

"We'll know if she fails. The Noyans always return the bodies of people they kill."

"The bodies of men. We don't know about Janice, for nothing like this has ever happened before. I wonder if her parents are alive."

"I told you to read *The People Who Matter*. They're both dead," said Bill. "They died a long time ago. She never knew them."

"That doesn't make it any better. Someone should have looked after her."

Bill didn't answer that. After twenty-eight hours of trying to shake Jeff from his mood of pessimism he was worn out.

The door opened and Janice entered. They leapt to their feet and stared at her. She was caked in mud and dust, covered with bruises and cuts, and dead tired. But she was safe and she walked in steadily.

"Janice!" exclaimed Jeff.

She held up her hand. "No talk. I want a bath and some clean clothes. And someone might make some hot coffee and sandwiches. I haven't eaten for ten hours."

That was all. She went through the hut to the rooms she had used while they were training her for her masquerade as a Noyan. For long moments they stared after her. Then Bill murmured: "Think she got it?"

Jeff's pessimism was gone. "She got it," he said jubilantly. "I always knew she would."

That robbed Bill of the power of speech.

Janice wasn't long. She was back, washed, her hair shining again, dressed in slacks and a shirt and hardly even looking tired now, just as the coffee was ready.

They said nothing as she sat at the plain table and drank coffee. She didn't seem ready to talk either. Involuntarily, in his impatience, Jeff reached out with his mind, and rocked to his heels as he was slapped back by a mental punch he wouldn't have believed existed. He gaped at Janice, who hadn't even put down her cup.

Before they could speak, Bill rose hurriedly. "I've an idea I'm in the way," he said. "In fact, I've had an idea all along about something. Maybe you know what I mean, Janice."

"The devil you have!" exclaimed Janice. "You kept it well hidden."

At the door Bill grinned. "So did you," he murmured. Then he went out.

"What's this I'm missing?" Jeff demanded.

"Forget it. About the Noyans—what I learned I'm keeping to myself. You know what that means?"

It was the second big shock for Jeff within a minute. She had said it as if she meant it. "We'll be driven off the planet!" he exclaimed.

"Eventually," said Janice coolly. "Suntown could stay as it is, but sooner or later UOF would see that there's so many planets it would be better to put in some work somewhere else than waste time here. This is the Noyans' world, Jeff. If we could do any good here I'd say stay. But we can't."

Jeff stared angrily at her. "You can't mean it," he said.

"You know I mean it. You knew it when you said we'd be driven off the planet."

"What's this, anyway? A revolt of women everywhere against men?"

"Don't be hysterical. I'm tired. I don't want to talk any more to-night. Besides, what is there to say?"

"One of these days," said Jeff with controlled rage, "I'll get the woman operative I've been asking for. Keep quiet if you like. What you found out, she can find out. Then we can make the Noyans co-operate."

"Wrong on two counts. When you get your woman operative—if you get her—she won't learn anything, for I'll see that the Noyans can identify her. Secondly, you can't make anyone co-operate. If they're ready to work with you, that's co-operation. If they're not, it's tyranny."

She rose. "I'm going to bed."

Jeff watched her go to the door, anger burning in him like a flame. He

was about to jump up and drag her back. But then something happened.

Suddenly there was a Noyan in front of Janice. In one hand she held a knife, and as Janice stopped and surveyed her, she plunged the knife in Janice's breast.

Jeff leapt wildly forward and dragged the Noyan away. He expected her to dematerialise as they always did when caught, but she stayed solid and helpless in his grasp.

"No, you can't go, Miro," said Janice in the Noyan spoken language. Jeff whirled. The knife was still in Janice's breast. It didn't seem to bother her.

"I don't know what you expected to accomplish," said Janice bitterly to Miro, "but you have spoiled my plans. I'd just told Jeff that what I learned I was keeping to myself. But it can't stay secret now."

For a moment the three stared at each other, Miro still held in Jeff's grip. Then Miro began to sob.

"Sit down, Miro," said Janice. "You can leave her alone, Jeff. It isn't you that's keeping her here, it's me."

Miro sank in a chair, still weeping.

"For the love of Mike take that thing out of you," said Jeff.

Janice drew it out and threw it aside. Her shirt was cut, but there was no welling blood underneath.

"You have to know now," said Janice to Jeff, still in the Noyan language, so that Miro could understand. "You'd work it out for yourself, anyway. Stop crying, Miro. Jeff will do as I say. I told you men were often under women's orders among us, though you may think Earth women are just pets or child-bearing machines."

She picked up the knife again and tapped it thoughtfully on her palm. "Something like this happened once before," she said. "Did you ever hear how in an early war back on Earth one side suddenly started shooting machine-gun fire through the propellers of the old planes they used then? It was a big advance. The other side had headaches trying to figure it out. In the end they had to send over a spy. He learned the machine-gun was triggered from the propeller shaft—so that wherever the airscrew was, however fast or slow it was turning, the bullets could never hit it. Simple, wasn't it?"

She grinned. "But a man had to go among the enemy risking his life to find that out. Something you'd have thought anyone could see in two minutes. This was a repeat performance. The Noyans never had real teleport, Jeff. They couldn't materialise somewhere else any more than you or I could. Miro isn't here, she's at least ten miles away in a city called Muna."

Jeff frowned. "But they knocked us out! It's happened to me. Are you trying to tell me I was knocked out by nothing? And are you saying I couldn't detect an attempt to plant a delusion in my mind? Because if so . . ."

Janice shook her head. "The Noyans are master mind-technicians," she said. "They knew they couldn't plant delusions *in* a mind that had a screen down. But while we still don't know the part of the brain that performs the various functions, they knew all about that hundreds of years ago. You can put down a screen, but outside that screen is the part of the mind that

deals with simple perceptions. You're screened, you know no one has touched your mind proper, but you accept what you hear and see. You never guess that what your eyes and ears tell you has been tampered with—at source."

Jeff began to see. "Then that's why they never tried to kill us," he murmured.

Janice nodded. "When a man *knows* he's been hit on the head, his mind switches off. And if your perceptions have never let you down, you trust them. So when you *knew* a Noyan had hit you behind the ear with a heavy padded bar, you went down and stayed down. You even developed a bump. Hypnotism can do the same thing. But you can't hypnotise a man into being dead. If you know you've been stabbed through the heart, you may lose consciousness, but it comes back. You still believe you've been stabbed. But your body, uninjured, refuses to die. You can knock a man unconscious with a blow that never touches him, or even with a word sometimes. But you can't kill him. He's not so easy to kill as that."

"So that's why they always attacked the same way. No attempt to kill, only to put us out for a few seconds or a few minutes."

Janice still had the knife in her hand. "Now that you know it isn't there, what happens? Look and see."

Jeff blinked at the knife. He closed his eyes and looked at it again. His eyes still tried to tell him it was there, but he kept telling them to look again. Presently he saw Janice's hand through the knife. Then there was no knife.

Janice grinned. "You see how strong it is? Here's a better example of how it works. You see this?" She pointed to where her shirt was cut. "Don't tell yourself that because there was no knife there can be no cut. What do you see?"

Jeff grinned. "I see a bit of you. But why no blood?"

"Remember, you're rationalising your delusions. You saw I wasn't hurt. Therefore when I removed the knife you saw no blood. Besides, Miro knew by that time she was wasting her time, and she supplied no blood in her picture. But the knife had gone through my shirt, so there must be a cut. You still see it. And you see my skin through it. Or do you?"

She unbuttoned her shirt and flicked it open. Below it she wore a bra which had no cut. Jeff could never have seen her skin through the tear in her shirt. And as she fastened it again, he saw the cut had gone.

"That's a complete demonstration," she said. "Now you know why the Noyans confined themselves to trucks with a few men in them. One mind can only work on the perceptions of a few people. Remember, it isn't hypnotism. You made it easy for the Noyans by attacking in closed trucks. Only a few saw each Noyan, and only a few *had* to see each Noyan. Get it?"

"Now he knows," said Miro. "And the Strangers will over-run our world."

They had almost forgotten her. Jeff looked at her again, trying to make her disappear too. Janice read his thought.

"No, she won't go," she said, "for I'm keeping her here. But you're wrong, Miro. The Strangers will stay here for a while, but they'll never overrun your world. Jeff won't help them to do it, will you, Jeff?"

Jeff frowned. "I'm a UOF man," he said bluntly. "I can't let Earthmen



be killed."

"They were killed only when they tried to interfere with the Noyans. The Noyans killed them in self-defence—on their own world, near their own cities."

"But how do I know I should keep this secret? That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Yes—though you'd think someone would have seen it long ago. Why do I want you to keep it? Because the Noyans have their own way of life, Jeff, and we can't force ours on them. And until we did, there would be no co-operation. It's no use talking about liberating the Noyan men. I've seen them, and they don't want to be liberated. When they do, if that ever happens, they'll do it themselves—like women a few centuries ago on Earth."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. Go on to Nome. Report that Noya represents no problem, and if you're asked for more details, or told to pay more attention to Noya, say you can only do one thing at a time, and you're busy with Nome. You ought to know enough about UOF internal politics to be able to handle that sort of situation by this time. And as for Noya, our stay in Suntown is almost over anyway. You can't sustain a colony that isn't allowed to expand. In six months or two years or ten years the UOF will decide to leave Noya alone—maybe sooner if someone points out a few facts to the top brass. If there are any advances in the future, they'll come from the Noyans."

Jeff nodded. "I expect you're right. You're an amazing woman, Janice."

Miro stood up, a smile breaking on her face. "She is," she said. "She's shown what your system can produce, Stranger, and it'll take us a while to get used to the idea. Women on a world of sex equality who can go further than women on a world where women rule. I think there will be advances from Noya to Earth—eventually. But you must give us time."

Janice smiled at her. Suddenly, released, Miro was gone.

"I wonder why she attacked you when she knew it wouldn't work?" Jeff mused.

Janice shrugged. "Just desperation. She thought she'd betrayed her race. She was ready to try anything."

Jeff stroked his jaw thoughtfully. "So that's that," he said. "Fine job I made on my first big assignment. I'll have to do something pretty spectacular on Nome if I want to keep my name from being mud."

"Why?"

"I don't know how much you know about the UOF, Janice. But I'll tell you this much. It co-opts people, sure. All the same, it doesn't count on civilians to come in and do its work for it. When I report that you did the whole thing . . ."

"You don't need to report anything. Exept what I told you. Weren't you listening?" She yawned. "Well, I'm going to bed. I don't think Earthmen will be on Noya much longer, and I'll have to look round here while I can."

"What for?"

"I have to collect material for a book. People know I'm here and that's what I came for. I couldn't very well write the truth, could I?"

She went out, leaving Jeff speechless. Material for a book! A book like *In the Caverns of Mercury*, no doubt.

Suddenly a great light burst in his brain. She couldn't very well write the truth . . .

*What had happened in the caverns of Mercury?*

He had been asking UOF for the best woman operative they had. And Janice came out—as a civilian. She finished her job and then started talking about a book, not to tell the truth, but to conceal it. And soon Janice Hiller would appear somewhere else in the galaxy as a writer of sentimental tripe that people like to read.

All of a sudden he felt a much greater respect for her books.

## VIII

Jeff watched as the radio operator sent his message. It would go to Anara, only a light-week away but outside the NO section, and a ship would come to take him to Nome. It was a pleasant feeling to be able to order UOF ships about like that.

"Have you sent the report, Horner?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Both of them."

"Both?"

"Yours and Major Hiller's, sir."

So she was a major—his own substantive rank. In a way it was a relief. He had thought she might be an Exec, and able to order him about. Still, she had no right to send reports from Noya without saying a word to him. He was Commanding Officer, NO sector, and even if she was an Exec One she should still report through him, however condescendingly.

"Did Major Hiller give the codeword?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Also her number."

Under the UOF system of giving a few people a lot of responsibility, there had to be some method of limiting the power a particular operative could exert and at the same time indicate just how great it was. Each operative had a personal number, and woe betide anyone who gave a number not in the book. Jeff wanted to ask Janice's number and look her up in the book, but he knew he had no right to do it.

The less UOF operatives, particularly secret ones, knew about each other the better. Janice had given the operator her number, presumably, because otherwise he wouldn't send her report. But there was no emergency, and Jeff was a telepath. It was therefore strictly against orders for him to find out a thing his own radio operator knew. Someone might some day discover from him how high or how low Janice Hiller was rated in the UOF—therefore how dangerous Janice Hiller might be. Which wouldn't please the UOF, since it was obviously a well-guarded secret that Janice was in the UOF at all.

Jeff sighed and wandered out of the radio hut. It would be ten days before the ship would arrive to take him to Nome. Meantime there was nothing he could do.

Or was there? He saw Janice sunbathing in the thick Noyan grass. At least, it must be Janice, though he could only see a glint of white through the grass, for no one else would have the cheek to lie in the grass three hundred yards from the nearest hut in the direction of the Noyan hill

strongholds, wearing a *siron*. He plodded through the thick grass.

She was actually asleep. Jeff's grim frown disappeared. Apparently she had got up to report, but fell asleep again whenever she relaxed. It was less than twelve hours since she had been dodging through Noyans in their own valley, knowing it was death to be caught. Now she looked about sixteen, her face smooth and relaxed, so childlike and trustful that Jeff had a fantastic idea of building a Wendy hut round her as she slept. Creatures as lovely as this shouldn't be risked merely to save or destroy worlds. The manipulation of the galaxy was unimportant beside such beauty. He wanted to tiptoe away and leave her to her dreams.

"What the hell's the good of tiptoeing," Janice demanded wrathfully, "if you think at people in that roaring, thundering, mind-shattering bellow of yours? Who could sleep through that mental cacophany?"

Hastily Jeff dropped his mental blind. The idyll wasn't quite shattered. She was still beautiful, though a little more mature when she was awake. In fact, old enough for him. He saw no reason why he shouldn't think of Janice as a desirable, and perhaps attainable girl, and not, for the moment, Major J. Hiller, UOF.

"And if you're thinking what I think you're thinking," said Janice, amused, her wrath forgotten, "you'd better work fast, for my ship will pick you up in about four hours."

"Your ship?"

"Don't say you've asked Anara for a ship," Janice said—knowing, Jeff guessed, he had. "I thought you'd be in a hurry to get to Nome. I had a UOF scout in the offing in case I needed it, so now that I don't, it might as well take you to Nome."

Jeff breathed deeply. "Did you take long to learn to be so irritating," he demanded, "or did it just come unnaturally?"

"Have I done something to offend you?" she asked anxiously—but her eyes still laughed.

"I wonder," Jeff murmured. "You couldn't be in a hurry to get rid of me so that if anything else happens here, it'll be handled as *you* want it handled?"

"You said I couldn't. Not I. Incidentally, if you did ask Anara to send a ship, hadn't you better go and tell the people there it won't be needed? Also, what about packing?"

He was being rushed off Noya. Oh, well—it was time he had a look at Nome anyway.

Even before he landed at Nome City Jeff learned a few things about the world he hadn't known. In the first place, he was to be the sole representative of the UOF there. The Nomans weren't much impressed by the UOF. It could have a representative if it liked—so much the better, in fact, since there were so many Terran visitors to Nome these days. But whoever was sent would have to be Terran ambassador, police chief and UOF agent rolled into one.

Nome's position was peculiar. Earth had contacted the world nearly a century since, and after ninety-eight Terran years Nome was neither vassal nor overlord of Earth, neither conqueror nor conquered. Theoretically, Earth had the power to crush Nome so completely that any cry of "Aggression!" could be stilled at birth. But on the other hand, Nome had enough

wealth to buy the whole Earth system, sell it at the first offer, and notice no difference. Nome could either buy or buy off an army.

Jeff had known that, and that Nome was the World of Sports. Children were asked at school on Earth (and probably on many other planets): "What is the World of Sports?" and would parrot back: "Nome!" though they didn't know what the Sports were, and why Nomans took part in them.

But he hadn't known that he would have to handle any problem Nome might represent on his own. It was not, of course, that he wanted Janice's help. She had been useful in a specific capacity—because she was a woman and the Noyans were women. In fact, just before the scout landed him at Nome City, Jeff very nearly decided to send a tart message saying he could handle this on his own.

Sanity prevailed. No one had ever said he couldn't. On the other hand, he hadn't even seen a Noman yet. A few days ago he had been fulminating at the UOF for failing to understand local conditions and circumstances. Well, what did he know of Noman conditions and circumstances?

He made a resolution. For three months he was going to do nothing but look around. He repeated that to himself, just to make sure it was fully understood. Three months—nothing but look around. Then the galaxy would see Major Jeff Croner in action.

The ship swung over the field and dropped slowly. In his room at the Grande, despite its name one of Nome City's less pretentious hotels, Jeff watched it until the fantastic skyline of the metropolis cut it off from his view. Then he turned from the window and pretended to himself he was reading a magazine, merely ordinarily curious about the mail from the ship which would arrive in a few minutes.

He couldn't help remembering another occasion when he had awaited the arrival of another spaceship on another world with similar impatience. That was the ship which had brought Janice Hiller to Noya. Jeff allowed himself to imagine Janice stepping from the ship on this planet and making her way through the pleasure city to his hotel.

He had spent his three months looking around. But even before that period was over, he had revised a conclusion he had made. That was the one about handling it himself.

Jeff was the UOF on Nome; he was there by courtesy of the Noman Senate, and his powers, privileges, and prestige, added up, checked and initialled, came to precisely nil. Well, perhaps that wasn't quite right. It was wrong to say that he had no prestige on the planet. His personal prestige was actually well on the minus side—for he had been on Nome three months and had never taken part in the Sports.

Janice had left Noya soon after he had. Everything must have been satisfactory to her and to the UOF, for Jeff hadn't heard a word about Noya since. That suited him excellently. Nome was enough for one man at one time.

What Janice had been doing since, Jeff didn't know. A month ago had been Christmas (though it made no difference to either Noya or Nome) and she had sent him a Christmas card, all holly and cherubs and angels. The only postmark on the envelope was Wirk, which was eighty-three light-years from Nome.

The time at which she would have arrived if she had been on the ship

came and went. But perhaps she was sauntering slowly along, taking time to stare at the Nomans in their vivid cloaks, their silk trousers, their shorts and skirts, their heavy wreaths of Sports medals, their glittering bracelets and anklets. The Nomans were beautiful because they were healthy; and they were healthy because they had to be. People would stare at her too, as they stared at everyone just in from the spaceport, not because they were strangers, but because they were overdressed and wore no kind of Sports wreath, not even the start of one. On Nome, wearing too many clothes was dangerous. One wore a shirt or a blouse when one was recovering from a Sports injury. If people wore them when they had no injury they were liable to run into trouble.

But even allowing for that, Jeff saw the time for Janice to arrive was long past, and when the buzzer sounded he knew it was only the mail. He went to the door and accepted a bundle of letters from the indifferent delivery boy. Nomans took it in turns to work, and from the boy's casual air it was evident that his spell of service was almost over.

There was only one official letter. Jeff tore it open and scanned it. But the first line told the story. "I must repeat," it stated coldly, "that the situation on Nome does not appear to demand the presence of the operative you mention."

And what, thought Jeff furiously, do *you* know about the situation on Nome?

The letter went on: "When the circumstances demanded it on a previous occasion, as you know, the operative in question was duly sent to give assistance." (By agreement the Nomans left official mail to Jeff unopened. But there was nothing like making sure.) "You have failed to give any satisfactory reason why an operative of her sex is required in the present instance."

She isn't, Jeff muttered savagely. I need her as an operative this time, not specially as a girl.

"It has even been suggested," remarked the letter coolly, "that you are allowing personal considerations to influence you."

Jeff swore. If he wanted to woo Janice, he'd do it on Earth, not out here.

"Another consideration," the note continued, "is that this operative is in a position to take or refuse assignments at will, and her services are of such a standard that we are compelled to accept this system."

Trying to put it on Janice now, Jeff thought. Well, if they were right in their insinuation that was the end of the matter. If Janice had been asked, and said no, he wasn't going to go down on his knees to her. But he wasn't sure she had been asked.

There was more in the letter, but nothing new. It was cautious in what it revealed, but not too cautious. If the Nomans said they didn't open official mail, they probably didn't. The Nomans weren't markedly dishonest or underhand. In fact, if it was a plain question of taking the word of an Earthman or a Noman, Jeff was ready to pick the Noman.

Anyway, that was that. Jeff burned the letter. He stripped and showered, still in a savage mood. There was no reason to go out except that there was even less reason to stay in. He wanted an opportunity to vent his feelings on someone else, and he was almost ready to admit it.

He put on the light sandals and the turquoise silk trunks. He wound a brown cloak about him, light as a breeze. That was permitted by convention, and it would do something to hide the absence of a Sports wreath.

He strode out of the hotel and along the street. It was early evening, but even in the middle of the night the same sun would shine. For Nome was a one-faced world, the same side always basking in the sun. Unlike most worlds of its kind, it had as much habitation on the dark side as on the light side. Nome was a world of pleasure, and it needed night life. The planet, a young world, was still kept so warm by inner fires that there was only a few degrees' difference between the temperatures of the dark and light sides. So Nome was a world of night and day, where one could choose the night and the day whenever one wished. The underground tubes were so fast that it was only a fifteen-minute run from day to night.

Jeff found what he was looking for without even trying. Head down, he bumped into someone coming the other way, and it was only at the last moment, realising the possibilities of the accidental situation, that he deliberately heaved with his shoulder and sent the other crashing against the nearest wall.

The man might have been an Earthman, a Martian or a dozen other things, but as it happened he was a Noman, as was obvious when he spoke. The Noman consonants were slurred and nothing out of the ordinary, but the vowels were beyond all other races. There had never been a non-Noman who could pass as a native.

He leapt angrily to his feet, but as he saw Jeff's expression he frowned, then laughed. "Looking for trouble?" he asked. "I've felt like that too. Well, you've found it. Shall I take you apart here, or do you want it more private?"

"It doesn't matter a damn," said Jeff, "to me."

The Noman's eyes lighted with interest. "Oh, an Earthman. What's your name, Earthman?"

"Jeff." The Nomans used only one name, so Jeff did the same.

"And I'm Ofru. There's a gymnasium, Earthman, right on the other side of the street."

## IX

Jeff followed him. Nomans fought a little more than Earthmen of that particular time, not much. Most of their surplus energy went in the Sports.

They entered, and already feeling better Jeff paid the small coin for the use of the room that was nothing but a huge ruberoid ball with a door in it. Once the door was closed, two or more men could batter themselves about to their hearts' content. Rules and duration were up to the contestants. But on the whole the damage was expected to be slight. If one of the fighters died, the other was liable to find himself charged with murder—not a death-penalty offence, under these conditions, but still serious.

The Noman stared as Jeff threw off his cloak. "No wreath?" he asked. "Just arrived?"

"No."

Ofru shrugged his shoulders. "Oh well. It's your business."

Which showed, with other things he had said and done in the two minutes Jeff had known him, that there was nothing wrong with Ofru. So did his

remark when he saw that Jeff was a little smaller than himself: "If you like to apologise, without necessarily being abject about it, we'll call it off and have a drink instead."

But he was dangling his own wreath as he spoke, and in it were enough medals for three ordinary men.

"Thanks," said Jeff, "but then I'd have to go out and look for somebody else, and he might be bigger."

Ofru laughed.

They faced the electric eye and declared that the fight would be clean and moderate, and that it was in no way forced on either. There was a brain behind that eye, even if it was moronic. It didn't open the door if it observed certain classified indications that the fight was going to be serious.

It opened for Jeff and Ofru, however. Each wearing only trunks, they entered.

"Try that, Earthman," said Ofru, and as Jeff moved his head the Noman's fist shot past his ear.

Like all Nomans, Ofru knew little or nothing of defence. It didn't make matters any easier for Jeff, certainly not at first. For like all Nomans Ofru was a specialist in attack. Jeff settled grimly to the task of wearing his opponent down, making him expend just a little more energy and take a little more punishment than Jeff did. When an attack was beaten down, Jeff's long arm would jab, and Ofru took it as he was meant to take it.

Ofru saw what was happening and pressed furiously. But it made no difference to Jeff, who was trying nothing spectacular at the moment. Defence was his only plan. Soon Ofru was blowing violently in the thicker air which was a slight advantage to Jeff. After nearly five minutes of continuous fighting, Jeff, still patient, got in his first real blow, a straight punch over the heart. It didn't stop Ofru, but it warned him of what was coming.

"Mat," Ofru shouted, and after the warning, scrupulously correct, he dived at Jeff's legs. It was an announcement that Ofru was dropping boxing in favour of wrestling, where his presumed greater strength and weight would be an advantage.

But Jeff had always been a better wrestler than boxer, and instead of turning the fight in Ofru's favour, it turned it even more in Jeff's. It was over in two minutes, Ofru being forced to admit defeat.

As they left the sphere Ofru was a little depressed. "I thought I could lick anyone my size," he said, "which is big. Never met an Earthman who could fight like you, Jeff. Tell me—just to restore or annihilate my self-esteem—how do you rate?"

Jeff grinned. "Consider it restored," he said. "I suppose I'd rate pretty high. "Say . . ." exclaimed Ofru. "You're not Jeff Croner, the UOF man, are you?"

Jeff nodded. Ofru paused, irresolute. Clearly he had heard something in which Jeff figured. Jeff waited. Ofru made up his mind. "I like you," he said. "I happened to hear your name mentioned the other day. Don't go near the main Nome City Sports ground. I can't tell you why not, because I don't know. But there's something—some reason why you should stay away from there."

Jeff grinned again. "You realise I'll go straight there now," he said.



"Well, if that's the way you want to take it, all right. But I gave you the warning anyway."

Within two minutes Jeff was on his way to the Sports ground. He had asked Ofru his address and promised to look him up. He was glad to know someone who was prepared to be his friend even if he didn't wear a Sports wreath.

Someone was doing the Drop as Jeff arrived. There were nine hundred and forth-three Sports, each with its own medal. The Drop was typical. A man was shot two hundred feet in the air from a sling. He had three repulsors at his belt. With them he had to let himself down. Using one repulsor to slow a fall was like trying to balance on a stick. Two were no better. But three could be pointed, held and balanced so that a man dropped smoothly and gently to the ground. It wasn't easy, but it was possible. Of course, if he dropped one of the repulsors, he was finished. There was no way of balancing against the repulsive force of only two of the little guns.

The man who was trying it must have done it before. He was patient, letting himself fall until he had the repulsors held exactly as he wanted them. Then he slowed himself steadily and carefully, until at last he touched the ground lightly, erect. He would get his Drop medal.

The medals weren't given merely for doing the Sports once. In most cases they had to be done ten times. In some cases they had to be done under special conditions before the medal was granted. The Maze, for example, had to be done in under an hour, which meant the layout had to be learned by heart.

Jeff settled down coolly to watch. If anything was going to happen here, he would have to give it time. He had to be seen and presumably certain preparations had to be made.

They wouldn't shoot him. That would be an overt act, and Earth would treat it as such. As UOF representative on Nome Jeff might have no power, but he was supposed to have safety.

The same principle underlay the entire range of Sports. They were all dangerous—any of them might mean death, or at least serious injury. They were all fair—never demanding pure strength, so that the Sports were the same for men and women, young and old. And they were entirely voluntary.

That was the theory. In practice, few could endure the ostracism that was the lot of the man without a Sports wreath. So everyone took part. The Nomans because it was their system of population control, because they had had the Sports for centuries, because they couldn't imagine life without Sports: the visitors because they came for the Sports, as they had once gone to Switzerland for ski-ing.

Someone was about to do the Dive. That had been borrowed from Earth's showgrounds—the Nomans were always prepared to learn. It was simply the hundred-foot dive into a tank of water. A bronzed body flashed in the air, there was a slight splash, and the diver climbed out unharmed.

To the left a girl was starting the Target. Her feet were fixed to the ground. Then when she was ready, heavy darts shot from a special throwing machine at her. Nothing she did would move her feet. So she could sway to avoid the darts, or even bend over backwards, touch her head on the ground and rise, if she had the strength for it. But that wouldn't help. She wasn't supposed to touch the ground. As a mild deterrent, the ground

about her was charged with electricity which would give her a severe shock.

This girl knew what she was doing, too. She swayed easily and lightly, never throwing herself off balance in her efforts to avoid the darts. The trick was to avoid the darts and only just. They came regularly one every three seconds for three minutes. Swinging too far out of their path meant less time to get into position to avoid the next. One of the last darts caught in her long skirt and was turned slightly to gash her leg, but no one had any sympathy for her. It was asking for trouble to wear loose clothes for a Sport like the Target. She would know better the next time.

A sudden commotion and stirring of interest indicated that someone had been killed. Jeff glanced in the direction of the noise. The man who had died must have been doing the Drive. For that there was a runway very like a switchback on Earth, except that there was no rail and the cars had to be steered. They moved at an inflexible twenty-five miles an hour. If the test was dangerous, it was also, like all the Sports, perfectly possible. But one man hadn't found it so.

The Sports, for the Nomans, were natural enough. They were human, but there was no disease on their world and they lived a full hundred years. There had been no war for centuries, and families were large. Something like the Sports was necessary to control the teeming population. Five million died every month, which was just about enough to keep the world's economy stable.

That was all very well for the Nomans, Jeff thought. It was their business. But more and more people were coming from other worlds to try the Sports, and many of them were dying. That, too, might be fair enough. They were the dare-devils, the playboys and the playgirls. Sometimes people like that seemed to want to be killed. But Jeff suspected a plan behind the Sports, a plan the ordinary Noman or visitor knew nothing about. He might be wrong—but he wanted Janice to come to Nome and help him to make sure he was.

When someone died in the Sports, the Nome State, by law, took a quarter of his possessions. That accounted for the planet's wealth, for the Senate invested money on a dozen worlds, kept the profit, and handed the capital back in Sports prizes. So the Sports were more than a planet's population control and main occupation—they were a profession.

Suddenly Jeff turned, tensed. Twenty or so young men and girls were coming towards him. There was a purpose about their movements, and they could be seeking no one but him. This, then, was what Ofru had warned him about—even if Ofru didn't know what it was. They were drunk, Jeff saw. Not incapable, for a Noman was very seldom incapable. But certainly wilder than usual.

A tall, red-haired youth who was apparently the leader, stepped up to him. "Here's Jeff Croner, the Earth spy," the youth jeered. "Come on, spy, you're going to try the Sports. You've dodged them for three months, but it's time you showed a little courage. You call yourself a man, don't you?"

"The Sports are voluntary," said Jeff coldly. "I don't choose to take part in them. I'm not here for my own amusement."

"But *we* choose to make you take part in them," said the youth, grinning.

"If you're not a coward, Earthman, you'll do it freely."

Jeff shook his head, but two husky young men had him by the arms. He might handle them, but there were half a dozen others to take their places. He didn't struggle.

"I'll raise hell about this," he said evenly.

"Maybe the police will find us and maybe not," said the leader. "Maybe they won't look too hard. Everybody takes part in the Sports. Why should you be different? You can start with the Target."

Jeff was dragged to the Target area. Someone took his cloak from him. Then everyone stepped back and the first dart came.

The darts were heavy and they came with inch-perfect accuracy. Anyone who took one in the face, chest or stomach would die. Jeff forgot anger, put speculation aside, and devoted all his attention to the test. He began to have a respect for the girl he had just seen doing it. You needed coolness to let the darts flick past within an inch of you, and already, as they missed, be preparing to swing into their flight the instant they were past. But he had no doubt of the outcome if the test was fair. That was the question. The Sports were all obviously dangerous, but they were supposed to be the same for everybody. Yet, Jeff thought, too many people died . . .

But at last it was over, and he was without a scratch. The score or so of young Nomans applauded sincerely.

"Perfect," said the red-haired leader, who wore, Jeff saw, the Target badge. "You'll have a wreath in no time."

"Thanks, I don't want one," said Jeff. "Satisfied? Now I'll——"

"Oh, you've only started," the youth told him cheerfully. "Let's try the Point next."

## X

Try as he might, Jeff couldn't see the purpose. That there was one, he knew from Ofru's warning. There was a plan behind this, and it was far more serious than it appeared. The youths and girls didn't look like secret Noman agents, and probably they weren't. Someone had suggested this to them, probably very adroitly. It was in the nature of a students' escapade, and appealed to them as such. But whoever was behind it must know that he, as a top-ranking UOF man, could probably go through every one of the nine hundred and forty-three Sports and emerge unharmed at the other end.

The Point was a simple little test. You sat in a sort of throne screwed up so that your feet only just reached the ground. Before you was fixed a long knife with a poisoned tip, a fraction of an inch from your stomach. The problem was to get out. The knife and throne were adjusted to offer the same difficulties to everyone, and it was impossible to shift either of them. It was necessary to squirm round and under the fixed knife, knowing that if it was allowed to scratch you, nothing could save you.

Jeff knew the secret, which was to use the knife as a guide and let it cut along his trunks towards the waist as he turned and slipped down. If any of the Sports were simpler than the others, this was the simplest. All that was in it was that instead of trying to draw away from the knife, which was possible if you pressed into the throne, you got as close to it as you could without letting it prick the skin, and squirmed round it. People modestly tried to avoid cutting their clothes, but if you did that you were stuck hope-



lessly or fell forward just as you seemed to be clearing the knife. The closer you were to the knife, the easier it was.

They cheered again as Jeff stepped clear, and made him try the Drop. It required iron nerve and a good working knowledge of the repulsors that were used. Jeff had both. He landed quite spectacularly, as though he did the Drop every morning before breakfast.

They were going to make him try the Drive, but it was night now, though there was no darkness, and the Sports were closing for the day. They left as they came, in a body. Jeff was left alone, still puzzled.

He made his way back to the hotel, wondering. People died in the Sports, but that was understandable when it was a matter of prestige to have as many different things as possible on the wreath. Once one Sport was completed, people could wear a complete wreath, made up all of the same medal. But it was the ambition of every Noman to have a medal for every available space on the wreath, and there was room for five hundred. Few achieved it. The tenth time they tried the Point, say, it was natural enough, especially for showmen like the Nomans, to squirm rapidly under the knife, missing their clothes completely, and then only notice as they stood up triumphantly

that the knife had made a tiny scratch. Or in the Drop people would wait too long, grinning down at the others watching, and then get into a spin with no time to right it. There were hundreds of possibilities when the Nomans' ambition entailed risking their lives five thousand times.

But for Jeff it was different. He had never participated in the Sports because he wanted some return for risking his life. The Nomans had it—prestige. It was nothing to him—or at least, nothing that was worth the risk.

He let himself into his rooms and threw aside his cloak. Suddenly he sniffed. But before he had time to work out the implications of that trace of perfume, the girl who had left it in her wake had stepped from the bedroom and was smiling at him.

She was a Noman, or at least she was dressed as a Noman, and he had never seen her before. She wore the usual shorts, armlets and anklets, but she must have been hurt in the Sports recently, for she also wore a loose blouse. She was pretty, but not unusually so. She did look more intelligent than usual, but that was all that was noticeable about her.

"What the devil do you want?" he demanded.

"You are quite satisfied this room isn't tapped?" she asked. Her voice dispelled any doubt that she was Noman. Others could talk the language fluently and comprehensively, as Jeff did, but not like the natives.

"Quite," he said.

"It's important."

He went through to the bedroom and returned with a flat instrument. It sent out a weak broadcast power beam which ran along any wires there might be in the vicinity. It registered the phone, nothing else. The lighting was on a self-contained system—not much lighting was needed when there was no night. He altered the settings and the instrument emitted a faint hum which echoed back from the walls. It showed where sounds, short of hidden speakers, must stop. It told him that what was said might be heard in the bedroom or bathroom, nowhere else. He had a look round the flat, checking all cupboards and possible hiding-places, to make sure. Finally he tested for a small wireless transmitter.

"Nothing," he said decidedly.

"Good," said the girl. Before his eyes her face changed. It was purely a muscular alteration. Her head had been held differently, her nose pulled flatter by the very skin over it, her mouth had been looser and more sensual, her eyes wider and less wrinkled. Now the simple, but effective, disguise was wiped off.

"Janice!" he exclaimed.

"I came in on the ship to-day. But quite unofficially."

She gripped his hand man-style, and grinned at him.

"So they sent you after all. I——"

"No. I said it was unofficial. The UOF told me you wanted me, but I was busy then and besides, there was something I had to do first. I always like to have something in reserve."

"And I know what it is. You talk like a Noman. How do you do it?"

"I waited until a woman was sentenced for murder on one of the worlds where they still electrocute women. I stole her mind a few seconds before she died. Naturally I speak as she did."

"I see. That would be the only way, of course. And now you know more than I do about Nome."

"Up to a point. They tell me that telepathy won't help me here. I don't see why not. I got everything that Noman woman had ever known without undue difficulty."

"Yes, but that was the only way you could make mental contact. The Nomans are non-telepaths. That doesn't mean you can't read their minds—you know that. It means that as you have to enter their minds to do it, they know about it. You can't read minds secretly on this world, no matter how you rate in telepathy. So the UOF were right—telepathy isn't much good to an operative on Nome. That was one reason why they didn't want to send you—or so they told me. They've got every operative graded, of course, and your speciality is supposed to be telepathy—not unnaturally, after the Noyan affair. So they thought it a waste to send you here."

Janice nodded. "I see. But you still wanted me?"

"I wanted someone I know, trust and respect."

Janice curtsied. She put on an act of taking it as a joke, but she couldn't hide the fact that she was pleased.

"It couldn't be Bill," said Jeff, "because he's still on Noya, handling the last days of Suntown nicely. One of the three of us is needed there."

Janice agreed. "So you picked on me?"

"You can work things out. And there's something here that needs working out."

"What?"

Jeff shrugged. "That's the trouble. Look at it this way. If as many people as die on Nome every day died anywhere else, the UOF would be interested, wouldn't it? Especially as nine or ten of them are Earthmen, with a fair sprinkling of people from other planets in the UOF group. But the Sports have been going on for so long, centuries before Earthmen came here, that everyone accepts them. Nevertheless, though I have no ideas about it after three months of looking, I know—that's the only word—I *know* there's a plan behind all these deaths."

Janice grinned. "You know how you *know*?" she asked, mimicking his stress of the word. "Unconsciously you've been using telepathy and picking up stray tendrils of thought. The Nomans are human, Jeff, to the tenth decimal place. That goes for telepathy too. They may not have the capacity for it that we have, just as the Eskimoes and Japanese don't have it on Earth. But you can't have a human race that's completely non-telepathic."

Jeff stared, then grinned wryly. "I suppose you're right," he admitted. "But if you throw your mind open on this planet and listen to a lot of beautiful nothings it's hard to believe."

"There's one other thing," said Janice. "I'm here as Janice Hiller, the novelist, of course. My connection with UOF is still secret, I think. And as plain Janice Hiller I had a lot of pressure put on me to visit Nome."

Jeff frowned. "Pressure? What kind of pressure?"

"My friends told me I should come. Why? They didn't know, but I did, after a careful glance at their minds. The Nomans may be non-telepaths, but a telepathic command had been given to my friends to suggest I came here."

Jeff had been pacing about the room, but that brought him up short.

"You're sure?" he asked, but he knew it was a silly question. Janice didn't bother to answer it.

"Then my publisher suggested I come here and write a novel on the Sports. There isn't one, you know—not an informed one anyway."

"There still won't be after you've written yours," Jeff grunted.

Janice was not offended. "Some day, when I'm old," she said, "I'll write a novel that isn't meant to cover up the fact that I'm a UOF operative. It probably won't sell, but the critics will love it. But to return—my publisher was the same. He didn't know it, but he'd been given a telepathic command to get me to Nome."

"Didn't you learn anything from the kind of command it was?"

"No. Which shows it must have been well done. Janice Hiller isn't supposed to be a telepath. I've bewailed the fact publicly once or twice. So they—whoever *they* are—wouldn't expect me to find out what I did. Which means, if you exercise a little logic on the facts, that they don't know me except as the novelist and want me here simply as Janice Hiller."

Jeff thought about it, nodding silently in agreement. They didn't discuss it.

"What's your plan now?" he asked.

"I came here to risk my neck in the Sports."

"It may be more dangerous than it looks."

"Possibly."

He told her what had happened that night—complete. She said no more about it than he had done about the information she had given him. Information was needed, not speculation. Speculation might be necessary too, but they didn't have to do it together. Their common ground was facts.

"I think I'm safe enough for the moment," Janice said. "It would look strange if something happened to me right away. Your idea is that the Sports kill anyone the Noman Senate wants killed?"

"Not the Senate. Some party above and behind the Senate."

"And what we have to find out is the purpose. Right. Now I'll have to get back to my hotel. I'll meet you officially to-morrow, but I wanted to see you privately first. It's known, if anyone cares to investigate, that you and I met on Noya. It will be natural enough if I ring you up in the morning and you come over to see me in the afternoon—perhaps start me off in the Sports. I know plenty about them, but I'm not supposed to."

Jeff agreed. As he watched, she reset her face. "Armine is the name I'm using," she told him. Her voice, when she spoke in Noman, was different, quite apart from the change of language.

In a few moments she was gone. But left with Jeff was a feeling of confidence he had never had on Nome. It wasn't confidence in Janice. It was confidence in Janice and himself, as a team.

## XI

In a corner of Janice's mind was crammed all the knowledge of a Noman. She knew as she dressed in a watered-silk frock that it was the wrong dress for Nome. But the popular novelist who wrote about whispers by moonlight and romantic jungle planets wouldn't know a thing like that. So the wrong dress was right.

She rang Jeff. "Hallo, Jeff," she said.

"Don't tell me," came the voice from the other end of the line. "You're





Terran, but I don't think I met you on Earth. Am I getting warm?"

"The time—four months ago," said Janice. "The place—Noya."

"Oh, you practically told me," said Jeff, disappointed. "You're Janice Hiller."

"Right. Are you terribly busy, or can you take time off to show an old friend around?"

The telephone was silent for a moment. Then it demanded: "Do you still have those legs?"

Janice looked down and hitched up her skirt with some complacency. "Yes, same legs," she said.

"Have you put on weight?"

"Same overall dimensions."

"You haven't married again, have you?"

"I haven't been married for years."

"Then if you look out of the window you'll see me coming. But you'll have to be quick. Oh—where are you?"

"Spaceport Hotel."

The phone went dead. Janice hung up, deciding that if anyone had been listening, which was unlikely, he couldn't have learned much from the conversation.

She left her room and went downstairs.

"Janice!" It was a joyful feminine shout. Janice turned with misgiving. It was justified, for the girl was Lesley Dowling.

Lesley was no more attractive than Janice, and probably not more than fifty points below her in intelligence, but people naturally thought of her as the supreme example of Beautiful but Dumb. That wasn't what bothered Janice, however. It was the fact that Lesley, who had been with her in some trouble on Mercury, knew enough about her to show anyone of fair intelligence something of who and what Janice really was. Lesley would never work it out herself—there was no danger on that account.

But there was a great danger that Lesley would casually tell someone else the very things which would enable him, or her, to reach the conclusion about Janice which Lesley herself would never reach.

"Hallo, Lesley," she said brightly. "I see you're acclimatised."

"When in Nome, do as the Nomans do," Lesley laughed.

Janice managed a smile, although the witticism was far older than Lesley.

Lesley had achieved the warm tan of Nome City, the metropolis on which the sun always shone, and to show it up she wore a dazzling white dress which was latticed here and there in the Nome fashion to show that she wasn't trying to avoid the Sports by pretending to be injured. She might have been a Noman girl, for she even had a wreath. Janice recognised the Swim and Dive medals, strung alternately to make a complete wreath.

Lesley went on to explain seriously why Janice's dress was wrong. Lesley was a lovable enough character. With her beauty she had plenty of good nature, generosity and interest in others. Women liked her and men loved her. She had been married four times and was single at the moment. Janice's view was that it took a smart man to marry so much money, with Lesley's father as he was, and unfortunately a smart man couldn't stand Lesley for long. It was a pity Lesley couldn't meet some dope as good-natured as herself. There seemed to be plenty of them in the galaxy.

Janice listened attentively, for what she was told about Nome represented what she could allow herself to know. She was grateful that Lesley's advice gave her the opportunity of leaving her to go and change.

She met Jeff in the lounge ten minutes later. A lot of people saw them meet, and it was little short of impossible that any of them read anything important into the meeting. Janice usually worked in secret, Jeff more in public. But both of them knew how to play a part.

"Lord, Janice," said Jeff, "you're a sight for fatigued visionary organs. Seems hardly decent in a hotel lounge."

"I was told," said Janice artlessly, "that everybody dresses like this on Nome."

"Sure. But good-looking girls are always good at finding excuses to wear next to nothing. Did you really need Nome custom?"

They talked in the same vein for quite a while. Not a word or a gesture would have revealed to the most astute watcher that they were anything but two young people meeting on a strange planet, with no thought other than mutual pleasure.

"You know the Sports," said Janice at last. "What would you advise me to try first?"

Jeff considered. It had to be like that. Janice knew more about the Sports than he did, but it would look strange if she picked all the tests that exactly fitted her capabilities, without advice.

"Try the Maze first," he said. "There's no danger there if you have a good visual memory."

"I thought they were all dangerous. That's why I came."

"You can kill yourself in any of them. But in the Maze the only danger is of getting so thoroughly lost that you wander about for days and finally drop and die of exhaustion. I don't think there's any risk of that happening to you."

"All right, let's go. I can't wait to start."

Even Janice, with her Noman knowledge, hesitated for a moment before going out in the street in her swimsuit-like outfit. But a glance at Jeff in his silk trunks reminded her. She chuckled. "I've just been on Asitede, where the human skin is sacred," she said. "The only thing you don't veil is your eyes. The priests of Asitede would go raving mad if you dropped them in this street."

There were more people at the Sports ground than there had been the



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previous night. Jeff and Janice wandered about watching the various Sports, Jeff wondering if he would again be forced to take part. But no one paid any special attention to them. Perhaps there were too many people about.

"There's the Maze," said Jeff, nodding at the high walls that ran into the distance. "It's a mile square. It's like mazes you've been in on Earth, except that you start at one corner and have to make your way to the opposite corner."

He led Janice to the entrance. The Sports grounds on Nome covered vast areas—all the space which would have been taken up on another world by parks or forests. There were a dozen Mazes at this ground alone, all different, and they were necessary, for only one person was allowed in a Maze at one time. All the Sports were individual. No opportunity was given for anyone to help anyone else.

This Maze was empty. The attendant eyed Janice and then put out his hands. Janice started and jumped back.

"It's all right," said Jeff in English. "He has to see that you have nothing to use as notes or a guide. If you had paper or pencil, or string, or anything to leave in the alleys, you might be able to make it easy for yourself."

Cautiously Janice allowed the man to feel over her and make sure she had nothing concealed. "It goes for provisions too," Jeff told her, though she knew. "People can have a heavy meal before they enter the Maze, but they can't take anything with them. Okay, I'll begin to look for you in about four hours."

The Noman must have understood English, for he grinned at that. Four hours was possible on the first attempt. It had been done in three. But most people took anything up to five days. If they needed longer, their strength failed and they died of starvation and exhaustion—and no one went into the Maze afterwards for at least two weeks. They were the victims of the Maze.

When Janice was inside the first passage, a heavy wall on massive hinges was swung shut on her. She would never get out that way. She could shout and scream, but no one would pay any attention. The only way was through the Maze.

Before moving, she considered what she knew. The passageways were about two yards wide and the concrete walls probably accounted for another foot. The Maze was about a mile square, which meant roughly 750 miles of passages. She worked it out again. Yes, 750 was right. No wonder people died in the Maze. It looked easy, until you started on the mathematics of it.

But the Maze could be done in under an hour, and had to be before the medal was granted. That meant that though she had to walk at least the length of the diagonal, the straightest route, the total distance of the correct route could not be more than four miles. After all, the Maze was the same for older people. With all the twists that there must be, four miles in fifty-seven minutes was the maximum.

She still made no move. Intelligence was not supposed to be enough to make any of the tests easy, but it must help. The diagonal was root two miles—one and a half miles. No, one point four something. She grinned. She might be a whale on telepathy, but her maths wasn't so hot. But she

had established the fact that there couldn't be a great deal of deviation from the diagonal. Small deviations from a straight line soon multiplied the distance.

She started off along the alley, came to a fork and chose the passage which led in the direction she wanted. It was a dead end. She retraced her steps and took the other way. Soon it forked again. Once more she took the alley that seemed to lead in the required direction, and this time it was right. At any rate, it took her a hundred yards on her way. She ignored passages leading off to either side. But then she came to another dead end and had to go back to the last passage.

The main difficulty for most people, she realised, would be loss of all sense of direction. She could still hear the sounds of the Sports ground, for the alleys were open to the sky. But that didn't help, for the sounds were probably the same all the way through the Maze.

Already many people could have lost all idea of their position in the Maze. But Janice knew almost exactly where she was—about two hundred yards from the entrance and almost on the line of the imaginary diagonal.

The test represented, or should represent, no danger to her. She had a plan of the part of the Maze she had seen fixed in her mind, and every new twist or fork was added automatically to the plan. She was satisfied already that she could traverse the Maze in fifty-seven minutes the next time—but that would be too spectacular.

After an hour she judged she was about the middle of the Maze. It seemed likely that the second half would be similar to the first. Half an

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hour to reach the middle would be reasonable. If pressed, Janice reckoned she could do it in twenty minutes, no less. And that would be running.

She had always been tough, but it was only when she went to Noya that she had really trained like an athlete. Once she was really fit, she liked it so well that she had kept in training since.

She slowed to a stroll in order not to reach the other end too quickly. She needn't have worried. There was a section just at the end which cost her an hour. It would give her no trouble again, but there was a moment just before she emerged into the open alley, the one that led straight out, when she fully understood how people had died in the Maze after days of wandering.

Jeff was waiting for her, with the attendant.

"Four hours fifty minutes," said Jeff. "You'll have to step up on that."

"Have you ever tried it?" she demanded. "It's no pushover." The attendant, she saw, was suitably impressed—that was, faintly surprised.

"That was fine," he said, when they were clear of the Maze and no one could possibly overhear their conversation. "I was afraid you couldn't resist doing it in two hours."

"Frankly, I couldn't have done it in two hours," Janice admitted. "I could do it in an hour now. But when you think of it, it's some test. I can understand the Nomans' point of view on the Sports better now. Every one is a challenge—and the danger's necessary. If I had known I only had to yell for someone to come and lead me out, I might have yelled at that last bit."

"Anyway, I expect that's enough for one day," said Jeff. "Let's go and eat."

"I agree about eating," said Janice, "but I think I'll try a few more things afterwards. Remember, I'm supposed to be enthusiastically collecting material for a book. The energy of Janice Hiller is known on a dozen worlds. It's wearing sometimes."

## XII

They didn't have to leave the Sports ground to have a meal. Janice chatted throughout the meal about nothing in particular. As the novelist, she wasn't stupid. The character she had built up was witty and sometimes brilliant, energetic, pleasure-loving, good-humoured and mature. The only things she hid were her capacity for rapid, effective action and her telepathic talent.

Jeff knew one Janice well, but the other was almost a stranger to him. She was a very attractive stranger.

It was curious, he thought, how he had always meant to get married, but never found a girl who measured up to his standards. Then he met Janice, and he knew without having to work it out that he could never measure up to hers. The novelist, the Janice he was with now, had about the right mental and physical rating. But this was Janice pretending to be an ordinary human being for a while.

Perhaps he over-estimated her. In fact, he knew he did. No girl could rate as he rated Janice.

When they were smoking afterwards, Jeff saw a girl coming towards them with purpose in her eyes.

"Someone who knows you is going to join us," he murmured. "Blonde

and beautiful."

"That must be Lesley," said Janice, and turned. Jeff was puzzled by her look of uneasiness, immediately wiped off her face.

Lesley and Jeff were introduced. Jeff had a flash of insight, the kind which had come to people long before the first secrets of telepathy were known, but which was always fuller and more exact for a telepath.

Something was going to involve the three of them, him, Janice, and the girl he had just met for the first time, in danger and terror and pain. Behind it would be the secret of Nome. And all they had to do to precipitate it was—nothing.

The band of youths and girls whom Jeff had met the night before was waiting for them outside. Not yet, said something in Jeff's mind. This was still only a preliminary. The young Nomans were only playing an adolescent prank. The real danger would come later.

Janice and Lesley watched surprised as the red-haired leader took Jeff's arm. "I see you have company this time, Earthman," he said. "And very nice company. Let the ladies pick something, and then you can show them how they should have done it."

"Won't you ever grow up?" asked Jeff wearily. "The whole Noman psychology," he said to Janice, "is adolescent. The entire world has stopped at the narcissistic stage."

"No stalling, spy," said the youth pleasantly. He turned to Lesley and asked her name. She told him. "Well, you pick something, Lesley, and

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then your glamorous friend can try it, and Jeff Croner will show you how little you know about doing the Sports."

Lesley didn't understand what was going on, but it was a crowd, and she was always happier in a crowd. Besides, Jeff and Janice didn't seem perturbed, so it must just be some kind of game. Lesley often found things she didn't understand. She was used to it.

After a glance at Jeff and Janice, assessing them, she chose the Walk. This was a stroll along the top of a wall fifty feet high and six inches wide. The Walk was three hundred yards long, and just to make sure it wasn't too easy a wind machine blew a forty-mile-an-hour blast the entire length of the wall—a wind that started and finished at forty but reached a full gale in the middle. It would have been impossible if the wind came in gusts, but it was steady. It was necessary to lean into it while walking along the wall.

But like most of the Sports, all this really needed was nerve. Jeff was only perturbed about Lesley. She was a Terran, and if she died in these circumstances he would have to take some action, and didn't know what. He watched tensely as she started along the catwalk high above. The wind licked lasciviously at her dress, and he wondered if he should have pointed out that the Walk would be easiest in skin-tight clothes.

She balanced against the wind quite confidently, however, leaning spectacularly as the gale reached its full force. Terrans were naturally sure-footed, for some reason, and this Sport was easier for them than for the Nomans. The only gales on Nome were artificial ones, while Terrans were used to combating real gales.

Lesley reached the end, and at once Janice was following her. Jeff didn't even watch. He was looking at the young Nomans, trying to work out from their attitude exactly what was behind the affair.

It seemed to be as he had decided already. Someone had suggested to them that it was about time that the UOF man, Croner, should be made to try the Sports. They had thought it was a good idea. He could learn nothing from them. He tried a mild telepathic probe, but the only reaction was a protest from Janice: "Look, Major, this may be easy but it still needs a little concentration. Get off the ether, will you?" Lesley, like the Nomans, was apparently a non-telepath.

Jeff did the Walk without difficulty. He was, he realised, getting dangerously near regarding the Sports as child's play. The point was driven home when he stumbled and could only save himself by a superhuman effort. Remember, Croner, he told himself, that's how the Nomans die, too. They start thinking they can do the Sports on their heads. Answer—one dead Noman.

Lesley's effort had apparently won her the Walk medal, and there was a cheerful ceremony as she restrung her wreath, putting a Walk medal after the Swim and Dive medals all the way round. She blushed faintly at the racy talk of the young Nomans, though she must have heard some racy talk in her time, and seemed very happy in the company. Jeff decided to enjoy himself too, since there was no way out of it.

A guarded beam from Janice brought him back to business. "There's someone watching us. Don't look. I'll show you him in my mind."



"Ofru !" Jeff exclaimed, as the clear picture formed.

"No need to shout," Janice retorted, though he had not used his vocal chords. The vocabulary of speech was naturally exploited in telepathy. Janice answered wryly, but she didn't use her vocal chords either. "Ofru is the man who warned you, isn't he?"

"Yes, but he seemed like a good fellow. I never thought . . ."

"No," Janice agreed. "Often an enemy turns out to be a good fellow, or vice versa. Anyway, the way he's watching, he doesn't want you to see him. I don't matter, apparently. I'm just part of the scenery, which suits us perfectly."

Lesley chose the Target next. Jeff protested that he had done it already, but the Nomans merely told him he'd be nearer getting his medal. So it was no question of finding something he couldn't do.

Lesley gave Jeff some bad moments, for she hadn't the co-ordination for a test like the Target. She might do it once or twice, but sooner or later she would make a mistake. He saw that Janice had reached the same conclusion. Perhaps Janice could persuade her to give the Target a miss in future.

Jeff was amazed and shocked when a cry rose as Janice, following Lesley, failed to avoid a dart and gashed her side badly. The darts went on coming, of course. No Sport could be stopped. One of the dangers was that a mild injury, early in a test, would be nothing in itself but quite enough to damage responses during the rest of a Sport.

Jeff half-opened his mind to give Janice all the help he could, but closed it again. He could help her, even take control, but her responses would be fractionally slower, and there was no time to spare.

She wasn't hit again, however, although by the time the darts stopped the blood from the gash had stained her white trunks and was running down her leg. Lesley ran to her, concerned, and Jeff turned to the Nomans.

"If you have anything else in mind," he said grimly, "forget it. I'm taking Janice home, if I have to fight the whole lot of you first."

But the young Nomans, who were sympathetic, raised no objections.

"No first aid station, of course," said Jeff. "That might save too many lives. Lesley, will you run on to the hotel and get things ready? I'll carry Janice."

It was the first time she had been in his arms. But he nearly dropped her when she spoke mentally, as they were still in a crowd.

"Ass," she said. "You don't think that was an accident, do you? There's such a thing as doing too well, and I'm not going to let it happen to me. Besides, despite your crack about wearing next to nothing, I brought an Earth wardrobe with me and I intend to wear it. This will give me an excuse."

"You mean you . . ."

"I took it just where I meant to take it. Janice Hiller, private citizen, is no superwoman. And I've got that mistake to prove it."

Jeff shut his mind quickly. It wouldn't do for Janice to see that he didn't have that kind of courage himself.

*(To be concluded)*

# Postmortem

● John Gutteridge, of Shoreham-by-Sea, Sussex, presents some shrewd remarks against some of the recent eulogistic letters we have had in *New Worlds*. "It is a pity," he writes, "that some fans are still obsessed with the illusion that British magazines may be favourably compared with their American contemporaries. Just when are they going to realise that such comparisons cannot be justified? Even in America you cannot say that a certain magazine is at the top of the field, for no two magazines can produce tip-top stories each issue. Then again, the magazines are sub-divided into slicks and pulps, which brings further complications."

"In Britain, although *New Worlds* comes out first in popularity because it publishes shorts, it is grossly unfair to match it against magazines which only publish one long novel. We shall not be able to say that any British magazine is the top one until more of them are published, and this does not look like happening yet awhile. If it is impossible to classify our own magazines, how on earth are we to compare them with the Americans? I defy any fan to name one American magazine which even approaches the same type of stories that are published in *New Worlds*. As you stated in the last issue, the rift between British and American magazines is widening fast."

(That, at least, has saved me one forthcoming editorial. Complimentary though most of these comparisons have

been, I feel it is like comparing a rowing boat with an ocean liner.—ED.)

● The regular epistle from Mr. P. W. Cutler, of Portsmouth, also touches upon this same subject, although he sees a somewhat different angle. "I note in the current *Post Mortem*," he writes, "a tendency to yammer rather hysterically about the quality of *New Worlds* and the magnificence of its authors compared with certain U.S. publications. I am, as you know, a No. 1 N.W. booster, but when I see references to the effect that N.W. is better than *Galaxy*, and that Tubb is amongst the second-best authors in the world, I begin to wonder whether such references are genuine opinions or made out of sheer patriotism."

"I am sure that you have no illusions about the status of *New Worlds*; it goes without saying that it is the top magazine in this country, but we must acknowledge the fact that, at the moment anyway, the top flight science-fiction authors are almost exclusively American, and being human they are going to sell their material to the magazines that pay the highest rates. The placing of Tubb second to Bradbury is, to say the least, fatuous, and although I am a great admirer of his work and must give him full marks for achieving such popularity in such a short space of time (I'd like to do half as well!), I cannot appreciate eulogistic comparison with his work and that of, say, de Camp, Heinlein,

Asimov, van Vogt, Coppel, Leiber, to mention but a few. I feel sure, and I think you are of the same opinion, that in time Mr. Tubb will be able to hold his own with any of the above-named, but when that time comes, will he still be writing for *New Worlds*? I would like to think so, but you know far better than I do how these things turn out."

*(Too true, I'm afraid. In building British writers for our own requirements we are becoming a nursery for the higher-paying American market. The saving grace is that British writers seldom channel their stories into the more rigid requirements of American editors.—Ed.)*

● W. B. Whitham, of Fleetwood, Lancs, after a long absence from our mail-bag, says "*New Worlds* seems to have settled down to a 'steady state' and, on the whole, I'm quite satisfied with it. One point, however, rather amuses me. A lot of your readers seem to do as I did once—make wild comparisons with other magazines. It's struck me that this is unfair, for they aim at a totally different market to yours, and, therefore, are not strictly comparable.

"I know this has taken me a long time to learn, but I have learnt it now. Even to try to draw 'quality' comparisons is invidious, for what *absolute* standard are you to have? There just isn't one as far as I can see—because there are as many aspects of the field as *there are readers!*"

*(It all comes down to a matter of personal opinion, in the main.—Ed.)*

● David A. Rice, of Cathays, Cardiff, in a long letter which specifically covered a number of issues, thought No. 15 the most outstanding issue we have yet published, and says: "I have nothing but praise for

Aiken's story 'Performance Test.' It ranks with the best. As I am myself a chemist, perhaps personal prejudice has something to do with it, but I would put Aiken up as one of the best writers of this type of story. 'Precedent' was extremely good and I would have given it second place but for one flaw.

"It was inexcusable, in a story based on the technical requirements of space-flight, to neglect the all-important fact that no chemical rocket-drive ship can ever take off from Earth without at least one booster—probably four or five steps will be needed, even with the most energetic chemical reaction existing. What can be done with atomics is a different matter, but then, the micro-control of mass ratio will not be important at all. Apart from that theory error, 'Precedent' was a very fine story."

● Archie Mercer, of London, W.4, complains bitterly: "Why can't you get back to the 'classic' Clothier covers? The ones I have in mind are (a) a spaceship standing on its beam end, with a little Dinky-toy lorry at its foot marked 'Clothier—Contractors'; (b) an aircraft swooping low over a futuristic metropolitan landscape, prominent among the buildings of which is the 'Clothier Hotel'; (c) a Martian canal-boat with a man in patched trousers passing an enormous waterside ruin. All three of these were superb. They set out to illustrate one particular scene, with no surrealist additions, and did it extremely well."

*(You are echoing many previous requests from readers, and I'll see what we can get Clothier to do in the near future. By the way, his name only appears on Man-made equipment when it is tucked away on a cover painting.—Ed.)*



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The Bleiler/Dikty volume contains fourteen stories from what was the *Best Stories of 1951*, a yearly anthology published by Frederick Fell of New York. This is an entirely new collection of stories to the First Series published by Grayson last autumn (not to be confused with a second *edition*), and contains such delightful vignettes as Fredric Brown's "The Last Martian," van Vogt's "Process," Bradbury's "The Fox in the Forest," and R. Bretnor's amusing fantasy "The Gnurrs Come from the Voodvork Out," which has been quoted and talked about ever since it was first published in *The Magazine of Fantasy* early in 1950.

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